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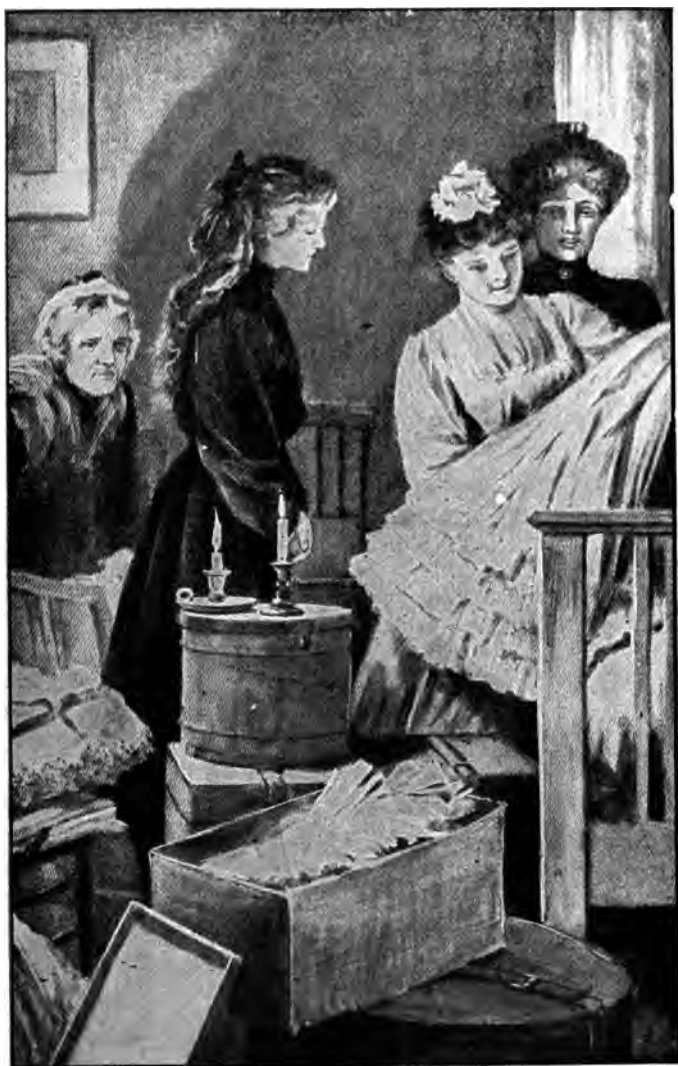


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“Oh my,” said Jane, “if this isn’t enough to dazzle ‘em.”

THE ODD ONE

A STORY FOR GIRLS

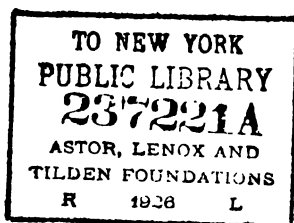
By FANNIE E. NEWBERRY

Author of "All Aboard," "Not for Profit," "Bubbles,"
"Joyce's Investments," "Sara a Princess," etc.



"They say best men are moulded out of faults."

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WITH A MOTHER'S LOVE

I Dedicate

THIS BOOK TO MY DAUGHTER,

GRACE.

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THE ODD ONE

CHAPTER I.

SHALL IT BE BETH?

"I will have to be Beth."

"Yes, that's correct," said Trix, ducking her head this way and that before the square chimney-glass. "Do you think these tips are too heavy, Nell? I could take that little one out, if you do."

"No, not for you," was the reply. "I should n't want to wear so many, but then, you're different, you can bear attracting notice — why don't you say something, Mother?"

The little woman in the willow rocker looked up with a smile. "I thought I'd let you girls settle it first," she observed, and returned to her intricate embroidery.

"Well, I think, though you did n't ask me, for I suppose you are referring to Beth, and not the feathers," — here stately Clarissa laid down her magazine impressively, — "that it might be as well to consult Beth, herself, before settling her future in this way."

"Oh, she won't care," chirped Beatrix. "Yes, the hat is overloaded; I shall take off that small tip, sure; besides, she's the odd one. Who else could go?"

"You mean who else would Grandpa care for, don't you?" came sharply from a small, black-haired gypsy in the window. "It's plain enough he wants Beth, whatever she thinks; don't you all say so?"

"If we do, I hope we say it more grammatically," remarked Clarissa, *sotto voce*.

"Don't mumble, Criss-cross. If you want to scold, come right out with it, do."

"I *never* scold," was the short reply.

"No, you only correct people, but that's worse. Come, Nell, let's go for a walk, — I'm stifling."

"But it's raining, child, don't you know?"

"Of course I do, and don't care. Have n't I a new waterproof?"

"Well, I have n't," laughed sweet Elinor, beginning to put up her work.

"No, you never have anything new, you poor, abused darling! But you shall carry my best umbrella, and I'll take the tent, if you say so."

"Oh, I should n't think of such a thing," cried Elinor, with a swift vision of the black-haired mite under that old and immense parachute of faded drab, "t would spoil the whole effect of the pretty Scotch-plaid cloak. Well, good-bye, all; don't spring it on Beth too suddenly," and the tall Elinor and little

Laura, known as Lala for short, left the living-room together.

For a time thereafter it was quite silent, save for the crackling of the fresh coal Trix had just flung upon the fire. Mamma Merritt, as her girls delighted to call the little woman, who was more their companion than mentor, sat, with her usual placid smile, which Beth called her "goldy" look, it was such pure sunshine, and watched the white and yellow marguerites grow under her facile fingers; Beatrix twisted about, pulled out, and replaced the obdurate feathers on the broad hat she was trimming, and Clarissa settled back to her easy chair and article, not looking for further skirmishes with the present inmates.

To this silent group, rapidly blending into the indistinctness of the shadows in the gathering twilight, there finally came the tap of boot-heels clicketing down the hard-wood stairway, and a moment later the door was flung wide, while some one said blithely, "What! all asleep? And who are you, anyhow? Everybody looks alike in this gloom."

"Why, Beth, where have you been?" asked Clarissa, in a tone of dignified reproof.

"Up in the owl-hole, my grave and reverend Clit; have you any 'dejections,' as Charity would say?"

"No, only we've missed you, dear," put in the mother, drawing a low hassock to her feet. "Sit down, Beth, I've something to tell you."

"How you scare me, Mamma Merritt! It recalls

the old, go-to-bed-without-your-supper days. Have I been *awfully* naughty?"

The mother laughed and stroked the head at her knee, which, as the struggling flames fell fitfully upon it, seemed to change from gold to bronze, and even to a coppery red at times, so uncertain was its hue.

"Beth," she began again, more soberly, "we've a letter from your Grandfather Merritt."

"Yes?"

"And he says he is ordered to California for his throat-complaint."

"To California?" The sweet, girlish voice expressed astonishment, mingled with something much like awe. It was plain that for her, California was an enchanted land.

"And he wants one of you girls to go with him."

"One of *us*? O mother!"

"Yes, and he speaks especially of you. Light the gas, please, Clit, so Beth can read the letter."

Clarissa, who, with Elinor, shared the tall stature of their dead father, rose to perform a service often required of her, and Beth, taking the letter from her mother's hand, stepped under the chandelier to read it. She thus showed distinctly a slender figure of medium height, crowned by a shapely head set proudly on a full white throat, whose locks, of a chestnut-auburn, if the term is allowable, had wilful kinks and curves which made a certain style of

dressing imperative. The eyes, of as uncertain hue, now looking nearly black from excitement, were shaded by dark-brown lashes, which curved upwards like a baby's ; but her prettiest feature was a sweet and sensitive mouth, with mobile lips, and coy dimples lurking in the corners. The complexion was not so fair as Elinor's, nor the coloring so rich as either Trix or Laura could lay claim to, but it changed with each emotion, while at times there was a singular, transparent light overspreading the whole face, like that of sunlight shining through finest porcelain, which seemed an illumination from within.

Yet her rather odd and careless dress, and the entire absence of an "air," which Clarissa constantly deplored, had kept her from being considered a beauty. Perhaps, too, the fact that her sisters were all exceptionally good-looking may have detracted from her rather peculiar and indescribable charm.

The characteristics most predominant in her at this time were a certain freshness and purity, like that of a violet, newly gathered, and a supreme contempt for all shams, conceits, and hypocrisies, to the belittling even of proper conventionalities.

Though older than both Beatrix and Laura, being in fact the centre of the group of five, she was often taken for the youngest of all. Yet, in the family, she was more often treated as the oldest when it came to a matter requiring prompt decision, for while other people were pottering about the edges of

indecision, hunting a secure foothold, Beth had a way of walking straight through the slough, finding stepping-stones enough to bear her well over the difficulty. So now she seemed to grasp the situation at a glance, and to make her decision almost as quickly, for she said, after a moment's perusal of the large, loosely-scrawled sheet: "I see. He feels that he will need some one a little nearer and dearer than good old Calvin in that far-away countree—poor Grandpa! But I don't quite see that the sentence, 'Could n't you spare Elizabeth as well as any?' means that he wants me particularly. It may mean that I am not specially needed at home."

She spoke in a ruminating tone, entirely without bitterness, then added brightly, "Yes, I think he's right, Mother; you know I've always been the fifth wheel here. It's Clit and Trix, and Nell and Lala, while Beth haunts the owl-hole, and the pine border, don't you know?"

"I know you are very dear to us all, my Beth," said the mother, tenderly, while Clarissa began a "For shame, Beth!" and Trix interrupted sharply, "What twaddle, you odd thing!"

Elizabeth gazed around upon them all with one of her illuminated looks. "Of course you love me, but it's all true. Grandpa needs me more than you do, and besides, who is there that could go but me? Clariss has the housekeeping, and Nell the plain sewing to oversee; Trix is milliner and dress-maker, and Lala has n't finished school. I'm only a

chinker, anyhow, and I'll have to be the one, but I'm afraid — ”

She paused, caught her breath, and reseated herself on the hassock. “Mamma Merritt,” she said tenderly, “it's a long way off, is n't it? Will you write me every day?”

“Some of us will, certainly, dear. Are you glad to go, Beth? You have always longed so to see the world.”

The girl made a little *moue*. “How much can one see of it when chained to an invalid's chair? Though, to be sure, there's the scenery—I suppose I'll see that.”

“And the wonderful air and sky, and the flowers, Beth!” added Trix.

“Yes, that's true.”

She clasped her hands around her knees, and sat for some time gazing into the fire.

“It is n't just like my dreams,” she said at last, with a little laugh, “but then, nothing ever is when it comes. I hope Grandpa won't be very — ”

“You know he is never *cross*, my child.”

“Oh no, only — well, exacting, perhaps. Poor man, I ought not to blame him if he was everything, after all he has suffered, I suppose. He certainly is generous about the money, Mother.”

“He ought to be, Beth; he can afford it.”

“Yes, but three hundred dollars for an outfit — how could you resist that bait, Trix?” laughing out with a clear, sweet note, like a child's.


"It was hard, but there were the conditions, you see. I should have been sent home in disgrace in less than a week. No, thank you, I'll wear turned gowns and home-made hats yet awhile, I believe," flourishing the broad, feather-loaded article about her head, while Clit observed ruminantly, "I might have thought of it more seriously myself, but that my duty so clearly lies here," glancing toward her mother.

Beth shot a wicked look from her laughing eyes. "I hope your duty does not *lie* anywhere, Clariss!" she remarked, ambiguously. "Mother, has she let you make any tea-cakes today?"

Clarissa drew herself up somewhat stiffly. She had just risen to leave the room, but stopped to say, "Certainly not, Beth; you never seem to understand that Mother has no strength to waste on your indulgencies. Come, Trix, it is time to make the salad, and I simply will not trust it to Charity, again."

With a sigh Trix followed her older sister, still balancing the hat upon her fingers, while gazing upon it with looks of admiration, and the door was scarcely closed behind them when Beth clasped her mother's hands and broke into an amused laugh, in which the other joined.

"Blessed old Clit! How she does like lording it over you, dear," cried the girl merrily. "By and by she won't even let you cut up your own food, Motherkin. Now, I like to tyrannize, too, but it's



in other ways, and you know I just won't think you an invalid, whatever they may say."

"Of course not, Beth, it's absurd! I should really be better for a few household tasks, but then Clarissa is a born manager — let her have her way. Do you hate to go, darling?"

"To California? No, I should love it in some other way, but Grandpa is a drawback."

"Remember, he is a weak, sickly old man, my child."

"Yes, and pampered, and selfish, and fond of ease, too, Mother; let us have the truth, and nothing but the truth between us two, dear. If he were a poorer man he would be a better, and a healthier, one; is n't that true?"

"Possibly, Beth, but little girls should n't be critics, especially of superior age and knowledge —"

"But just let me speak out this once, Mother; it will make it all easier by and by. Grandpa is not old enough to give up as he has, and become such a hypochondriac; he ought to have many an active year before him yet. I can't help — yes, I will say it — I can't help despising a man who will spend all his time measuring out drugs and counting his pulse, and all his money consulting new physicians, and buying patent medicines by the gross! I hope, when my time comes, I shall drop in harness, just as Papa did, even if it is in the very prime of my life, rather than dribble on year after year through such an existence as his father's is."

“Beth! Beth!”

“There, Mother, I’ve done now. I’ve said it out, and it will help me to keep silence in the hard times to come — for there will be hard times, I know. Oh, of course Calvin does all the real work and waiting on him, but there will be doleful days, and tiresome nights, just the same, for one like me, if it’s only just in curbing my tongue. Mother, dear, bless your little Beth before she leaves you!” and with a motion half deprecating, half fervent, she slipped to her knees, and dropped her bright head in her mother’s lap.

CHAPTER II.

TEA AND TRIMMINGS.

THERE followed a fortnight of busy, happy work.

It was so delightful to all these girls, usually restrained by the modest limits of a fixed income, to find what looked like a small fortune in their hands. To be sure, it was for Beth, but then Beth was generous, and when buying for herself scarce ever failed to think of some one else. Now, it was an extra yard of lace to finish the neck of Clit's one silk, now the second pair of gloves, because they would match so well with Trix's new hat, now a handkerchief or two, smuggled in for mother, and so on. When Beth's cup was full it always overflowed to bless somebody with the escaping drops. Then it was a delight simply to handle the soft, pretty fabrics a Californian climate made wearable, and to consult, and potter, and cut, and try.

They were all at it, one day, in the roomy library, the cheerful fire a blustering March made comfortable giving touches of beauty to the few knick-knacks, and even to the worn furniture. It was a pretty room, in spite of its occasional shabbiness, arranged with taste and grace, and wearing always an air of constant refined use. There were even

touches of luxury here and there, in the fineness of the lace hangings at the windows, and the genuineness of the pictures on the walls, which suggested wealthier, if not better, days. Yet its most charming fittings, after all, were the six fine-looking women who, in every attitude of alertness and interest, were gathered about the shimmer of silk in the centre. For this was the dress *par excellence* —

“Which I shall probably never wear!” Beth was calmly completing the sentence, “for I doubt if there ’ll be a single chance for Grandpa’s nurse to sport a primrose silk evening dress.”

“His nurse! How can you, Beth?” Clarissa’s fine eyebrows were drawn into a dainty frown. “You know perfectly well that you are going as a favored grandchild. Calvin is his attendant.”

“Yes, I know,” — Beth reeled off a needleful of silk and winked [I hate to own it, but it is true], winked unblushingly at Lala, who responded in kind — “‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,’ and a nurse by any other title can be kept as close; but then, who cares? There will be times, of course, and I think I could extract some fun out of — anything.”

Failing of comparisons, her tone, as well as sentence, fell rather flat.

“It’s queer fun though, sometimes,” remarked Trix, who was puckering some lace, and her lips, at the same time, “mooning away in that old owl-hole. Say, Mother, when she’s gone we can have

that for a store-room, and clean out some of the closets, can't we?"

"Now, Mamma Merritt," — Beth's tone was that of a whining, wheedling child, — "I want you to promise me to keep them out of my nest; won't you, dear? I'm going to lock it and leave the key with you, and you must wear it strung around your neck where a soul can't get at it; won't you, Motherkin?"

The little woman laughed. "You foolish child! What treasures you must keep concealed in that old drying-room. Will you give me the right to peep sometimes, if I wear your key on my heart, or are you a regular Bluebeard about that den?"

"No, Fatima, you may peep — a little. I'll lock up what nobody must see, and throw the keys in the well," answered Beth with cool effrontery, but with so loving and trusting a glance the words failed to wound.

"What is it you do there, anyhow, Beth?" asked Lala, lifting her great black eyes from the silken flounce she was blind-stitching, and shaking into position the heavy mass of coal-black hair she was generally in too great a hurry to secure properly.

"What do I do?" Beth's tone was dreamy. "Oh, great things, heroic things, outrageous things sometimes," laughing teasingly. "I create and pull down; I give life and take it away; I am a pagan, a Christian, a scholar, or a fool just as the humor takes me."

"Dear me! It is n't a bug collection, I hope,"

cried gentle Elinor, looking up from her patient toil over the button-holes. "It does seem a pagan thing to impale them alive on those awful pins!" and her sweet face and tender brown eyes were quite clouded at the thought.

Beth laughed out merrily. "No more sad looks then, maiden fair; I'm no bug fancier. Guess again."

"I do believe it's modelling!" broke out Trix, with a brilliant inspiration. "Is it, Beth?" her oval cheeks warmly red from the too ardent fire, and her eyes, of a lighter hue than Beth's, scanning the latter's face curiously.

"Oh, you are getting 'too warm,'" cried the quiz-zee [why isn't that as good a word as mortgagee, I wonder?], referring to a childish game, and playfully touching the pink cheeks to point her double meaning. "I can't answer another question."

"You mean 'won't,' don't you?" observed stately Clit, glancing at the clock. "Do you know, I think, just for a rarity, that a cup of afternoon tea would be quite refreshing, don't you?"

She looked toward her mother, but that lady was the only one who failed to answer in words.

"Oh, how lovely!" "You blessed old Clit!" "What a bright idea!" "I'm simply starved!" were some of the comments, the last emanating from Lala, who had the usual school-girl appetite; and the eldest of the five, much pleased, arose and touched the electric bell.

It was presently answered by a dumpy, pleasant-faced mulatto woman of middle age, who stopped just inside the door with a little bob of her plump person, and looked inquiring.

"Charity, you may bring in the samovar from the dining-room, and the tea-caddy," said Clarissa in a pleasant voice, for she was always lady-like to dependents, "also a trayful of cups and spoons. And have you any cakes or wafers?"

"Yes 'm. Ginger-drops, Miss Clit."

The tall girl wheeled swiftly toward her mother. "That means you have been stealing into the kitchen!" she said in a hurt tone.

Mrs. Merritt laughed outright. "Is that so wicked, dear? Yes, bring the ginger-drops, Charity. I'm so glad now that I made them! I think I should grow to my chair if I did nothing but sew and read, my child."

But Clit's face had lost its smile, and took on what her mother called her "Martha look," an expression compounded of injury and care-taking. It did seem too bad that her efforts to keep her mother from hard work, and her exceeding pains to have everything perfectly managed and appointed, so that the other's more mature supervision might not seem necessary, should be so constantly met by this spirit of persistent evasion of the daughter's — was the lacking word, authority? Clit always stopped there, and took up some other thread of thought, possibly a new line of self-glorification.

Today she said nothing more, but busied herself wheeling out the old-fashioned round table from the corner, and arranging its white cover, while, for a moment, an air of depression settled upon the group, as the clock ticked aloud amid the silence. It was a relief when its deep-toned bell boomed out the half-hour, and Beth, suppressing a sigh, sang out, "Half-past four, and all's well. There, that skirt's faced at last, and I'm glad of it. Now, let's all stop and take an intermission," and as she spoke, she drew the work gently from her mother's fingers, wheeled her chair right about to the table, and cried merrily, "Now, Clitty, 'put the kettle on; we'll all have tea'!"

Her gay tone proved infectious, and soon Clarissa conquered her petulance, as they all drew up about the samovar, while Trix and Beth passed the cream and sugar, and Lala followed with the offending ginger-drops.

"Well, they're good, anyhow!" murmured the latter, snatching one, and setting her small white teeth into its spongy lightness in a generous, girlish bite, while her gypsy face was lighted up mischievously as she glanced sidewise at Trix.

Nobody noticed, apparently, only Beth began to talk fast about some matter of the dressmaking, while Clit pointedly drank her tea, minus its accompanying cake. They were still chattering over the steaming cups when a manly step through the hall was followed by a measured rap.

"Come in, Thorne," cried Lala, with her mouth full, and the door opened to admit a young man of quiet appearance, whose pleased eyes, of a hazel-grey, took in the group with a leisurely glance before he spoke.

"A tea-fight, eh?" he remarked then, never dreaming how closely he was treading on facts, till a giggle from Lala somewhat enlightened him.

But Mrs. Merritt threw herself into the breach, and saved the situation. "Ah, Thorne, we're delighted to see you. Take this chair by me; its uncompromising severity of construction will just suit you. Elinor, have you an extra cup there?"

"Am I then so severe, Aunt Mary? But surely this leather chair is an honest one, and deceives one with no backward turns, or upward flings; thank you, Elinor. But what a sumptuous cup and saucer! Royal Dresden?"

"Certainly; painted at home and fired in Mr. Knight's new gas-kiln," explained Trix in a breath. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Charming! And you are the artist?"

"Of course," calmly.

"Trimmin's, Thorne?" broke in Beth, gaily, balancing a sugar-bowl and creamer before his eyes.

"Yes, cream, thank you," taking the pitcher from her pretty hand.

"But no sweetening, you austere man? Well, you may not think you need it, but—" a saucy flashing glance completing the sentence.

His quiet, sincere eyes lingered upon her face an instant. "I suppose I do need it," he allowed with some humility, "but it likes not me. Is n't this a new custom? Are we getting to be 'English, you know'?"

"No, only hungry," laughed Beth; "but if they have any better ways than ours across the big water, why not copy them? We're worthy of the best, I'm sure."

"Undoubtedly; and this is certainly a comfortable, home-like custom. How are you feeling today, Aunt Mary?" turning fondly toward Mrs. Merritt.

"Quite well — brilliant, in fact, Thorne; and you?"

"I am always well."

"And busy, too, are n't you? How did you get away so early, today?"

"The office is closed on account of a death in Mr. Greene's family; a niece, I believe."

"Indeed! That pretty Miss Greene with the blonde hair?" asked Elinor.

"Yes, I think so."

"Oh, how sad! She was so young."

"Just twenty, I believe."

"My age, exactly," said Beth. "How must it feel to die at twenty! Did she — was she conscious?"

"I understand she was not. She was first delirious, then passed away in a stupor, lasting many hours."

"I should want to be conscious," said Beth decidedly, while Thorne covertly watched her over his teacup. "I could bear almost anything if I had just a minute's chance to brace myself," she added musingly, "but I hate to be taken unaware!"

"Ugh! what a grave subject!" cried Trix flipantly. "See, Thorne, is n't this a pretty gown?" pointing to the silk.

"Beautiful! It looks, somehow, like a wedding, does n't it?"

"It's for Beth," observed Clarissa, "but I'm happy to say, *not* a wedding." Her voice held a touch of asperity, and every one in the room felt, instinctively, that it would not be pleasant for any of the sisters to think of marriage before the eldest made her somewhat tardy choice.

Thorne's eyes danced a trifle, but his voice was gravity itself, as he remarked, "But it's wonderfully fine, seems to me. I never saw Beth so dressed up as she will be in that. Is there to be some crush where I'm not expected?"

"No crush," answered Beth, demurely, "in fact, it's very select. It will consist of three."

"Three?" turning with an odd look. "You know the old saying, 'Two's company, but three's trumpery,' don't you?"

"Yes, but there's no trumpery about this trio, I assure you; rather a most Philistinish respectability. Its members are Grandpa Merritt, his valet, Calvin

Jones, and — your humble servant!” dropping an elaborate courtesy.

“Indeed! You are going to make Mr. Merritt a visit, then?”

“You have n’t hit it yet; try again, cousin,” cried Beth, teasingly.

“Then he is coming here?”

“Worse and worse!”

“Well, I give it up.”

“Of course! I knew you’d have to. Well, then, what do you say to my going to California to stay — indefinitely!”

His eyes fixed upon her face, widened and darkened, while the teacup in his hand shook an instant before he answered, “I should say, I hope it is n’t true.”

“Well, it is! Grandpa Merritt is ordered there for his bronchitis, or whatever it is, so I’m to go, too.”

“How could you let her, Aunt Mary?” He turned with an abruptness that was almost discourteous to Mrs. Merritt. She looked up surprisedly.

“Would n’t you recommend it, then? Beth has always been so anxious to travel, and this seemed an opportunity. Besides, I think her grandfather preferred her.”

“But she’s such a child!”

“‘A child!’ Well, I like that!” Beth’s tone

was strongly indignant, and she turned a flushed face upon the gentleman.

But he kept his eyes on her mother, who responded, "Hush, Beth! Of course she's young, and—and too impulsive, perhaps. Yet she has a little sense, I believe," smiling at the pouting girl.

"I never questioned her sense." Something in the strong, quiet tone smoothed away Beth's irritation.

"Oh, thank you!" she cried, breaking into a laugh. "'Me lud, you flatther me!'"

He smiled in response to her nonsense. "I was thinking more of the care and restraint for one so—may I dare say young?—rather than of any follies she might commit."

Beth's face shone. "I misjudged you, Thorne, I always do! I see, now, you appreciate what is before me, and I'm glad to have your sympathy."

As she spoke she stooped to remove his empty cup, and the warm, smooth little hand touched his fingers for an instant, while her eyes, close to his own, looked affectionately upon him. His next words had an almost despairing ring.

"And it's so far. If anything should happen!"

"But it won't; don't think it. Nothing ever happens to me, *ever*."

"I'm sure things happened fast enough when you were little," laughed her mother; "it sounds like comedy now, but some things seemed quite tragic then."

"Yes indeed," said Clarissa, "and anyhow, that's an argument for expecting something will happen now, don't you think?"

"It does n't strike me so," observed Elinor quickly; "many people lead quiet, uneventful lives from childhood to old age, don't they?"

"Oh, I hope I'm not one of them!" breathed Beth, impatiently. "I want things to happen. It's dreadful to think of a whole life and no great surprises, romances, or tragedies—is n't it, Thorne?"

"Dreadful? I can't agree with you, Beth. To me, it is the other thing that is dreadful, but perhaps I'm getting to an age to appreciate safe monotony," giving a half-sigh. "At least, I must own I prefer to take the tragedies from the pages of a first-class novel, rather than be a participant in them. Tragedies are serious things, my child."

Before Beth could reply, some one struck in with a comment on a certain new book which was exciting universal criticism at that time, and the talk drifted away from all personalities. Thorne, being over-persuaded, remained to the seven-o'clock dinner, but the trip to California received no further mention, except one.

Beth happened to be the one to accompany him to the door that night, and, as he took her hand in parting, he asked, under his breath, "You have fully decided to go, Beth?"

"Oh, yes, fully."

"And you feel no—no regrets?"

"About leaving them all? Yes, of course, especially Mother. But then, it will be delightful to come home again, and, if one travels, why, there must be partings, you know."

"Yes, there must be partings." He dropped her hand, turned away, and drawing on his gloves, went quickly down the steps. Beth watched him a minute, despite the keen wind roughly lifting the rings upon her forehead, then shut the door and went in again to the warm fireside.

"Dear old Thorne!" she murmured, "I believe he really feels sorry that I'm going. That sounded wonderfully like a sigh as he left me. It's queer the man does n't marry, and have a home all his own, when he is such a quiet, domestic sort of fellow. I wonder why he never has."

CHAPTER III.

SOME OF BETH'S FRIENDS.

THORNTON LEWIS might have answered the question, perhaps, had any one been daring enough to ask it, but no one else could. There was not even the suspicion of a romance in his past to account for his celibacy at an age rapidly approaching the turning point of life, if it be true that the tide of life does begin to flow backwards at thirty. No buried hopes, apparently, nor, so far as any one could see, those manifold hindrances of other kinds which keep many men single. Indeed, he seemed singularly unencumbered, for he was an orphan with no close relationships which might demand his protection and support, while, his business qualifications being excellent, he had always made a good income, much of which must have been saved, for his ideas of expenditure were simple, and his vices null.

Possibly the road to matrimony had been made too easy, and therefore unattractive, to a manly, square-shouldered fellow like himself. Whatever the reason, he was certainly a bachelor at twenty-eight, and seemed as far from having "intentions" as ever.

Though he called Mrs. Merritt aunt, and counsined all her daughters, he was really no relative whatever. His father dying when he was a small boy, he had been kindly adopted by that father's step-brother, who had married into the Merritt family. But there had been a constant and pleasant intercourse between the two households, and the boy had grown up to enjoy, and make the most of, those privileges and benefits which relationship confers in a refined and companionable circle of young girls.

Having now lost his adopted father, also, he lived with the widow, whom he affectionately called "mother," in an ornamental cottage of the new-old English style, owned by that lady, who was left more than comfortably well off. Mrs. Godfrey was a small, delicate-looking woman, who affected white zephyr shoulder-shawls, and a broad lounge with many pillows; who seldom went out, unless in the easiest of carriages; who talked in a caressing voice; who, though seeming of softest calibre, always had her own way in everything by the simple force of negative resistance, and who looked upon Thornton Lewis as the one perfect man in all the world.

They lived only a few blocks from the Merritts' larger, but more old-fashioned, home, and the girls brought her occasional news of social doings, and were, in turn, kept supplied with all the latest publications of a certain kind — for Mrs. Godfrey was an omniverous reader of ephemeral literature.

She took a great interest in the girls and all their

doings, and settled now upon one, now another, as a suitable wife for Thorne, as their varying attentions to herself constituted them prime favorites, or otherwise. For she was as impatient of neglect, or lack of due respect, as the most arrogant society woman, being a natural egoist, whose besetting fault was only increased by the self-centred luxuries of a semi-invalid life.

It might have occurred to some that in this peculiarity of the lady's lay the real reason of Thornton's bachelorhood, had she not been so continually urging marriage upon him, and were she not so free to express her longings in this respect to all with whom she came in contact.

"Really, Thorne ought to be married," she would exclaim in that over-sweet little drawl, reminding one of the slow, luscious outpouring of strained honey, "if only to show the world what a husband should be. Ah! it will be a happy woman who wins his love, my dear. There's his disposition, — such sweetness! such philosophy! such equanimity! As you have seen him now, so will you always see him. If there's any fault to be found with Thorne, he's *too* good!"

She often selected Beth as auditor to these eulogies, and the girl would go home to giggle over it with Trix and Lala. "To hear her makes you fairly despise him," she would say, "till you meet him again, and then he is so strong and sensible that you feel ashamed to let her influence you so. But I

wish, just once, he would burst out and do something awful, something that would shut her up for a while ; really, I do ! ”

When Thorne retailed the news of Beth's approaching journey, at their breakfast-table, the next morning after his visit to the Merritts', Mrs. Godfrey really awoke to animation over the tidings. “ Going to California ? What a chance ! Beth is really a charming girl, but, the fact is, so many sisters rather appall a man. Most of them are chary of marrying a whole family, especially one by no means well off. But I have n't a doubt Beth will do well, take her away by herself.”

“ How do you mean ? ” asked the gentleman opposite, with a somewhat inflexible voice.

“ Why, in marrying, of course. It's too bad for all those pretty girls to be left to grow into old-maidism when — ”

“ I hope you don't call twenty old-maidism, Mother ! ” and he clutched a muffin with more energy than the occasion seemed to warrant.

“ Oh, no indeed, Beth's all right, yet, but Clarissa — let me see, she must be twenty-five or six, is n't she ? And Elinor is not three years younger.”

Thorne laughed dryly. “ Why don't they send one of those two, then, if it's husbands they are in search of ? Do you suppose Clit will ever allow one of them to marry before she does ? ”

The lady smiled. “ It might not be comfortable, but I'm afraid it will have to be. Clit was an old

maid in pinafores. I never saw so proper a child!"

"You could n't say the same of Beth, Mother," his eyes beginning to twinkle at some absurd reminiscences of that young lady's childhood, for she had been noted for the ease and celerity with which she fell from one scrape into another. "Of all the mischievous, outrageous, unfortunate little tykes, Beth was the worst. Do you remember when she nearly starved the old Dorking rooster keeping him under a barrel to make him lay; and the time she enacted Santa Claus, and was climbing the back roof to take a slide down the kitchen-chimney, when I caught her? And was there ever a brook, or a puddle, that she did n't try to drown in, or a horse that did n't run away with her, or a fence that she did n't fall over, or hang suspended from? Oh, what a Beth!" and, leaning back, he laughed till his eyes were wet.

Mrs. Godfrey laughed, too, in her gentle, restrained way. "She was a trial, yet I always liked her. She was so grateful for little favors, and so generous, too. She never received an apple, or a bun, that she did n't at once begin dividing it into six equal parts before she set her teeth in it."

Thorne's eyes beamed delightedly upon the speaker. "You are right. She was as loyal and loving as she was hot-tempered and mischievous — dear little Beth!"

The last words were not audible to the lady,

however, who now began planning for a call at the Merritts', which necessitated a somewhat lengthy discussion over what style of carriage should be sent for her use, and whose stable should be patronized, as she had grievances against them all; but while Thorne drew on his spring top-coat she decided upon a coupé from the nearest barn, only to call after him as he crossed the veranda, "No, no, Thorne — it's so pleasant I believe I will have the victoria from Avery's, after all," and it was probably only a hastening of his steps that prevented a third order of an entirely new description, before he could board his car for down-town.

She arrived in some state just after the dress had been finished, and while Elinor was patiently pick-up the scattered bits, as Trix held it aloft for admiration, Clarissa meanwhile cautioning her against soiling it. Lala was the first to perceive the victoria, and broke out, "Run, girls, run! Carriage visitors."

"Oh, do whisk the duster over that table, while I brush up the hearth," cried Beth, in dismay, adding in a relieved voice, "oh, it's only Mrs. Godfrey."

The caller was soon ushered in by Charity, to find a leisurely group of ladies awaiting her in various attitudes of nonchalant ease, as they read, or sewed, in a room whose air of refined neatness suggested only the daintiest use. If Beth's cheeks were a bright red from her hurried stooping over the fire, and if Trix and the gown had barely whisked through the

opposite door, who was the wiser? Beth only looked unusually pretty, and Trix, entering leisurely a moment later, had probably been resting in her own room.

"How charmingly cosy you always are here," purred Mrs. Godfrey, as she sank into the easiest chair and loosened her wrap—heavily furred, though the eaves were dripping under the warm sun. "Thorne told me the news, and I could scarcely wait to get here and congratulate you."

Her laugh was a gentle little ripple, which never trenched upon vulgar heartiness, and her whole appearance, from the pale, small-featured face to the long, narrow, kid-encased hands crossed upon her lap, was that of hot-bed luxury and artificiality. You could not imagine the face distorted by strong emotion, nor the hands forgetfully employed in severe toil. You felt that life must be made easy for so delicate a creature.

"The news of Beth's departure? Yes, she goes in a few days, now." Mrs. Merritt spoke with a regretful accent, but her face was as serene as ever.

"Does Mr. Merritt come for you?" turning to the young lady in question.

"No, Mrs. Godfrey, I am to meet him in Chicago. He found he could not come through this way on a vestibule limited, so gave it up."

"And when is it you go?"

"Next Tuesday."

"So soon? We shall miss you, dear."

"Thank you. I'm afraid I shall be the one to feel it most," Beth went on in a suppressed voice. "If I could take Mother it would n't be so bad."

"Or me," put in Lala, with a grimace. "She can hardly exist without me."

There was a general laugh at this, for feuds between Beth and her youngest sister were frequent and severe. They were too alike in disposition not to clash, and a certain careless way Lala had of appropriating her belongings, and interfering with her pet projects, often drove Beth to the verge of hysterics and tears.

"Well," said the latter frankly, "I will own I've often wished Lala at the antipodes, when she bothers me so, but I presume I will think her an angel before I've put half a thousand miles between us!"

"Yes," demurely, "I've no doubt travel will bring you to your senses. It is a great educator, and you have 'a mind capable of improvement,' as Professor Marsh often reminds me."

While she spoke, Lala had been idly playing with the ivory paper-knife upon the table, and now, flipping it a little more carelessly than before, snapped off its point.

"There!" said Clarissa, in an annoyed tone.

"Yes, that is an illustration," continued Lala calmly, "I am unfortunate, you see."

"And a bit careless, perhaps," added her mother,

turning instantly to Mrs. Godfrey with some question foreign to the matter.

The gypsy leaned confidentially toward Elinor. "I feel squelched, Nell! May I retire, please?"

"No, redeem yourself," whispered the latter, with her mild, sweet look. "You know you deserved it, don't you?"

"Yes 'm," meekly. And soon Lala was herself again, joining pleasantly in the general conversation, her saucy manner and girlish brusqueness entirely subdued for the moment.

When their visitor had left, Lala breathed a sigh of relief. "*Isn't* she stupid?" she broke out, as if the words could no longer be repressed.

"My child!" admonished her mother, gravely.

"Well, Mamma Merritt, she *is*! She bores you so! Her voice is all on three notes—it is, really—and she has an exact expression and gesture for every sentence. I want to shake her up, shock her, startle her, every time I'm where she is."

"I imagine you succeed, Lala," observed Beth, with open sarcasm.

"I mean to. And you know you make as much fun of her as I do, so don't play propriety now, Miss Hypocrite."

"Hush, girls!" said their mother, in a tone they always obeyed. "Come, it is time for luncheon, and ladies do not discuss their guests before their steps have ceased to sound."

"Not your kind, Motherkin," said Beth, with a fond look, and the subject dropped.

It was a blustering morning when Beth took the train for her short ride to Chicago. The household, in a body, squeezed into the hack to accompany her as far as possible, from which, as Beth said, they "unpacked themselves" at the station, only to be met by Thorne's pleasant face.

"How good of you!" cried Beth, giving him her hand in greeting, "I wondered if I was not to see you again."

"I intended to call last night," he replied, "but was unavoidably detained."

He did not add that Mrs. Godfrey had found it imperative to have a new bottle of headache medicine which could only be procured at a down-town drug-store, and that, after his late dinner, the errand kept him out beyond calling hours, and Beth laid it to that vague "business" which is a man's only plea.

"It's a horrid morning, isn't it?" grumbled Lala. "I should hate to start on a journey today. Ugh! shut the door quick, Trix; it blows a hurricane."

They trooped in and gathered about the radiator in the waiting-room, while Thorne and Beth tramped about to ticket-offices and baggage-rooms.

"Two trunks, Beth?" he remarked, as he slipped the checks into her fingers. "And large ones, too; that looks like a long stay."

"But that's the uncertainty of it, Thorne; nobody can tell how long, so I had to go prepared. 'It may be for years, and it may be forever,'" she hummed, but he checked her quickly.

"Don't!" he said in a sharp tone. "I have limited you to three months — that will bring you back in June. You know June is your month, Beth. It's easier to bear things when they have a definite limit; it is uncertainty makes them intolerable."

She looked up quickly at his odd tone. "Why, Thorne!" she laughed, "you really take it to heart. And so will I," she added, catching her breath a little, while her face grew pale, "as soon as I'm really gone. But now, I dare not think!"

Her words seemed to be a reminder, for his next sentence, relating simply to her baggage, was as quiet and practical as ever, and when she finally boarded the train, while they all stood outside, keeping their emotions down with a strong hand, he found her a seat, and tucked her parcels away, with apparently no thought beyond her comfortable bestowal. Then he held out his hand with a grave "Good-bye, Beth."

Her eyes were swimming as she laid her slender fingers in his. "Good-bye, cousin; look — after — Mother" — and she could say no more.

Nor did she notice, through her tears, that his features had grown suddenly white and rigid. "Trust me," he murmured, wringing the little hand

almost painfully. "In June, remember," and hurried out of the coach.

There was the last look, the last flutter of white from the depot platform, then the train rounded a curve, and Beth leaned back with a feeling of sick despair, as if she had been caught in a trap from which there was no possibility of escape. How did she ever consent to leave them all, and what might not happen before her return?

But decorum sternly repressed the rising sobs, and kept the tears within bounds till she could swallow the pain, and the lump it generated in her white throat, and settle herself to a lady-like quietude again. Still, it was several minutes before she ventured even a glance around the coach. There was the usual assortment. Half a dozen men in silk tiles — persumably travelling agents; two or three in soft beavers, as presumably tourists; a few grangers who chewed and slept in bovine-like content; the customary old women with bird-cages, and young women with babies; two pretty girls off on a holiday, and — she was about to say that was all, when a chance look in the paneled mirror at the end of the coach caused her to encounter a pair of eyes fixed thus indirectly upon her own which belonged to some one behind her, evidently, and that some one a young man of such a perfect face that she could not refrain from a second and third glance into the accommodating mirror.

His color was of the *brune* order, his complexion

being of a clear, creamy pallor, and set off by large dark eyes, too beautiful for a man; while the nose, lips, and chin, still untouched by mustache or beard, were chiselled into rare perfection of outline. Yet with all this beauty was a figure and expression which entirely removed it from femininity. Beth, who usually held in light contempt the "pretty man," confessed to herself that here was an Adonis, indeed.

When, after a time, he walked down the aisle to the drinking-fountain and back again, during which promenade he had the grace to give her but one fleeting, passing glance, she saw that his whole appearance matched his face. Tall, alert, and distinguished as was his bearing, his hands, now ungloved, were nearly as delicate as a woman's, while his whole dress bore an air of refinement and ease as remote from the sleekness of the other men about her as possible.

"The very handsomest man I ever saw," decided Beth, without reserve. "He looks like a young prince travelling incognito; who can he be?"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED DINNER.

BETH expected to reach Chicago soon after noon, so had provided herself with no luncheon, except a little fruit. Therefore she was a bit concerned to hear two gentlemen, in conversation behind her, express annoyance that there would doubtless be a long stop at Elkhart for a certain train from the north, which was behind time and must be waited for. One of them, after some calculation over his watch and time-card, decided they would not be apt to reach the city before three o'clock, and, overhearing this, she reflected, "Well, I'm in for it, I see. However, I may be able to find something, somewhere, to assuage my cravings," and settled back to her book, determined not to worry.

She was not thoroughly familiar with this route, so did not know there was an eating-house at hand, until the brakeman announced that fact with a grand flourish, just as they slowed into the station, amid a confusing jumble of tracks and trains. A darkey upon the platform without was raising an unearthly din with a gong, and there was a hurrying, jostling crowd streaming across the intervening rails toward a door marked "EATING-ROOM."

Beth, having swiftly decided to alight, now looked out in dismay. There were few females, apparently no ladies, amid the throng (for oftentimes in traveling we are forced to the conclusion that all *ladies* remain at home!), and she dreaded the pushing and crowding which she saw must be encountered to reach a table, not to speak of a sweeping wind which set everything flying and would, she knew, tear her loosened hair into wisps. Besides, she had the usual womanish dread of being left by the train, feeling it to be an erratic monster, and likely to fly off without warning, in spite of all precedent to the contrary.

Would it not be better to go hungry rather than to encounter the nameless ills which seemed to attend an instant's absence from her present safe retreat?

Her cogitations were here interrupted by the sight of a white-aproned waiter with a well-filled tray skipping toward this very coach, and her decision was instantly formed. "He is bringing a lunch to some one; I'll see if I can't get him to bring me one, also."

Fishing up her purse from an inner, secret pocket, she waited for him, her alert expression changing to blank astonishment as the spruce attendant came directly toward her, and said, with a smile that displayed all his ivories, "I've brought yoh dinnah, lady," at the same time placing the appetizing viands upon the vacant seat opposite.

"Oh, you 've made a mistake," cried Beth. "It's for some other lady, but if you'll bring me two sandwiches and a cup of coffee, I'll —"

"Beg pahdon, Miss, but dis heah dinnah's foh you," returned the man with decision. "Dey aint no mistake, suah! De gemman pointed yoh out, Miss, an' I comed straight ovah. It's all right, an' no mistake."

"What gentleman?" demanded Beth.

"Could n't say, Miss. I wa'n't to ask no questions, nor answer 'em, on'y jest to serve you, Miss. Ef yoh don' drink dat coffee soon 't will be col', I reckon."

He handed her the cup with an air, and, not knowing what else to do, Beth received it. She was decidedly hungry, and its fumes were tempting. She sipped a little, still protesting, though more feebly, and when the polite darkey passed her a plateful of fried chicken, with light, hot biscuit, she was conquered.

"Well," she laughed, giving the man a smile that made his black eyes dance, "if I must I must; but some poor creature is probably starving in the other car. You'd better let me pay you for this, because —"

"I'se paid, Miss; don' yoh bothah! Yoh aint half finished dat cake; bettah let me leave it foh yoh, yoh may be hungriah byme-by."

"Very well," answered Beth, quite subdued, and watched the man wrap it neatly in an unsoiled

Japanese napkin with the feeling that she was taking part in some comedy which later might come to a disagreeable ending.

The obliging attendant withdrew with the empty dishes, and a smiling "Good-day, Miss," and, her appetite appeased, but not her curiosity, Beth began to berate herself.

"What have I done?" she thought. "Literally stolen somebody's luncheon. Dear, dear! What would Clariss say?" and she had to laugh outright at the picture of that maiden's horror over such a situation. Then she wondered, "What if they hunt me out, and pounce upon me for the crime? I hope I don't look so well-fed and comfortable as to be suspicious. And what will they do with me, anyhow?"

The coach had been nearly empty for a time, but was rapidly filling again. "One thing I must *not* do," she went on whimsically, to herself, "is to pick my teeth—that would be a regular give away!" for every in-coming man was chewing his sliver of wood; and her eyes, brighter than she was aware of from internal laughter, studied them critically, to see if she could divine by instinct the one who had unwittingly befriended her.

Just then the train began backing to a side-track, and, turning to look out of the window at her side, she had a sudden glimpse of a little scene that threw new light on the comedy. The reversed movement brought her in exact range with the eating-room door just as it was opened with a flourish by her

special waiter, for the exit of the handsome young man, who was laughing heartily in response to some rapid, gesticulated sentences of the darkey's. Instantly Beth understood it all! Her face flushed to the curls about her brow at the conviction thus thrust upon her, and at this inopportune instant the young man, still laughing (and showing as handsome ivories as the darkey's own thereby), raised his eyes to mark his coach, and met Beth's conscious, understanding gaze. As if involuntarily, his hand touched his hat, then with a rapid step he passed on, and Beth saw him no more.

"Oh! was there ever such a girl for getting into scrapes?" she groaned, sinking back in confusion. "Why couldn't I have thought of this at first, and why, not having thought of it at the time, must my dull brain grasp the truth at the worst moment possible? For he knows now that I know. Oh! Oh! I wish I was home, or in California, or anywhere! If he dares to presume on this! —"

She began to bridle, as if he already had, but she might have saved herself the trouble. Either he had not re-entered the train, or he was keeping himself well in retirement. Was he ashamed of his presumption, now he had had time to think of it? She furtively took an observation of his vacated seat, and saw that the valise she had noticed beside him was still there; evidently, then, he was upon the train, unless left behind at the last moment — serve him right if he was!

But, as he did not appear while the minutes grew into an hour, Beth smoothed her ruffled plumage, and began, in time, to have softer thoughts. After all, it was a kindly act on his part. He had doubtless seen her craning her neck out of the window toward the eating-room, and had read all her longing and hesitation in her face, — Lala always said her face told more than her tongue. — and so, being of a generous turn, had surprised her with a nice dinner. It certainly was delicate of him not to come back for any thanks; that showed he had gentlemanly instincts, at least; but as the time went by and he did not appear for that purpose, or any other, Beth, with the contrariness of womankind, began to wish intensely that he would.

“He might know that I would feel burdened with my gratitude!” she pouted, with a complete and shameless change of base. “I could make him a neat little speech, bow him away, and resume my book, and that would end it. Why *does n't* the goose come back?”

She had given him quite up, at last, and almost dismissed him from her mind, when the end door she was facing opened quickly, and there he was. Beth felt her coloring rising, and vexation at the knowledge only deepened the blush running up into her cheeks so prettily, while she dropped her eyes upon her book, determined not to raise the lids again; for, somehow, that little ceremony of gratitude did not seem so easy now. She felt his eyes

upon her as he passed, and caught her breath for fear he should stop, or speak. He did neither, however, but busied himself with tightening the straps of his valise, then lifting it, walked slowly away, back past her seat, and out of the coach — and no sooner had the door closed behind him than she would have given her prettiest gown to have called him back !

“ Oh ! ” she thought desperately, “ what will he think of me ? A girl who can’t acknowledge a kindness, but must flush like a — like a — ” Words failed her, as well as comparisons, and she drew down her veil with a wrench that threatened the thin texture, and pretended to read again.

A half-hour later they were steaming into the great depot at Chicago, and Beth was looking bewilderedly from the window, hoping to see her grandfather, or certainly Calvin, among the restless throng crowding its wide platforms. But no such sight relieved her growing apprehension. Had they forgotten her ? The train came to a stop, and she followed the crowd outside, but having reached terra firma, or rather the planks which covered it, she stood and gazed helplessly about her, not knowing which way to turn.

The crowd surged and jostled by while she grew sick with hope deferred, for what should she do in this great, awful place with no one to care for her ? Then somebody stepped between her and the unfeeling throng, and said respectfully, “ I beg pardon,

but you seem to be looking for some one ; can I assist you ? ”

Beth turned, to face the handsome stranger again, and this time relief overpowered all other feelings, while no blush stained her white cheeks. “ O sir,” she exclaimed quickly, almost confidentially, so glad was she of a friendly word, “ I expected my grandfather, or his man, and neither one is here. I really don’t know what to do ! ”

“ You know your grandfather’s address ? ” he asked with a deferential tone, and in a voice whose refinement Beth was even then vaguely conscious of, though so wrapped in her own perplexities.

“ Yes, he is at the Richelieu, or was to be, but — ”

Another man stepped forward, a colored one, who began, “ Beg pahdon, Miss, but am yoh Miss Mewitt ? ”

“ Yes,” cried Beth quickly, turning to him. “ Were you sent for me ? ”

“ Yes, Miss. The train’s late, and Mistah Mewitt was poohly and needed his man, so he tole me to wait, an’ look yoh up. Got any baggage, Miss ? I’ve a cawriage heah.”

The young gentleman at this stepped back, his hand to his hat, but Beth made a little gesture of detention. “ Wait, please,” nervously fishing up her checks for Sambo from the depths of an inconvenient pocket, “ I want to thank you, sir. This is the second favor — you see I understand about the

luncheon. It was — very kind. I dreaded the crowd and the jostling so. I'm not much of a traveller, as you can plainly see, sir," laughing in a charmingly confused way. "I am really grateful."

"Not at all, Miss Merritt. It gave me the greatest pleasure. And now that I have been accidentally made acquainted with your name, allow me —"

He handed his card, lifted his hat, said "Good-bye" in a lingering tone, and with a last look into her face, now bent over the bit of pasteboard, walked reluctantly away, leaving Beth studying over the simple inscription,

Lester Gordon Palmerlee.

U. S. N.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE RICHELIEU.

“ **A**H, you’ve come, Elizabeth? Glad to see you. Calvin, close that upper blind, will you? You had no difficulty getting here?”

“I was frightened a minute, till your darkey found me, Grandfather, but that was all.”

“Yes, Calvin went down at the proper hour, but when he had been gone some time I felt an attack coming on, so sent a hotel servant to relieve him. Your train was over an hour late.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” meekly, for his tone seemed to imply Beth was to blame for this.

“Your room is next to this, and a door between. Show her, Calvin. Did you tell them to send up your baggage?”

“The servant said it should be attended to.”

“Well, we dine at seven, and shall not start out again till tomorrow morning; I must have a good night’s rest. Calvin, is n’t it time for my drops?”

Beth felt herself dismissed.

“Yes, sir, in five minutes. This way, if you please, Miss Merritt.”

She followed the man, a tall, pale, grave-looking

fellow, across the apartment to a smaller one beyond. It was handsomely appointed and well warmed, for the blustering day was ending in a cold stillness, and the oppression which had immediately settled upon her when opposite her grandfather's spare form and wrinkled visage now lifted a little. She spent all the time possible at her toilet, hearing continually those querulous commands in the other room, and wondered that Calvin's dumb submission did not sometimes give way.

"I suppose he has grown used to it," sighed Beth. "I wonder if I ever will." And then, by contrast, came the warm memory of home, with its shabby comforts and delightful ease and unrestraint; and then, with a little flush, the later memory of her journey, and the young man, who was now dignified in her thoughts with a name. "And a good one, too," decided Beth, reperusing the card. "So he belongs to the navy? Well, he was a gentleman. I shall probably never see him again," and she sighed once more.

While at the ceremonious dinner, which her grandfather took at the table d' hôte, in spite of his feebleness, his long visage relaxed a trifle from its customary expression of cold disapproval, and he said quite pleasantly, "I am sorry I am not a younger man, to take you about somewhat, this evening, but I am afraid it won't do. Is there any way you can amuse yourself?"

"I could write letters," responded Beth rather

grimly, for it did seem too bad to be in this great city, and see nothing outside the walls of a hotel which boasted of its aristocratic seclusion and quiet.

"Well, yes," agreed her relative at once, "they will doubtless expect to hear from you at home, and you must be tired with your journey. We had best all retire early, to be fresh for tomorrow."

Beth concealed her dissatisfied face behind her napkin, and answered, "Very well," then used the nut-cracker with a snap that relieved her of some surplus energy.

As they left the café and passed through the broad, well-lighted corridors to the elevator, she said suddenly, "I think I will take a peep into the parlors, Grandfather, if you don't mind. I know the way to our rooms."

He looked dubious, but nodded a consent as he walked on, leaving her to her own devices. Beth smiled to herself. "It's a poor alternative, but it will while away a half-hour. I'll examine the furniture for Clarissa's benefit, and the people for Lala's, and if I see any millinery that is new, I'll lay it up in memory for Trix—bless their dear hearts?"

She found the first of the suite empty, however, so began to examine it at her leisure. "Why is it," she wondered, "that mere furniture alone has such a cold, heartless look, no matter how splendid, until you give it the added expression of human use? If

there were a paper, or magazine thrown half open upon this ebony table, if a lady's scarf trailed over that brocaded satin chair, if a bit of dainty needle-work was tossed carelessly upon that Louis Quatorze sofa, how different it would all seem!"

Then she began to people the fine, large room with suitably fine men and women, and, pleased with her own imaginings, paced softly over the thick moquette rug to the further end, and was about to turn back, as a gentleman entered the room and touched the electric bell at one side. One glance showed her who it was. "Lester Gordon Palmerlee!" she whispered, wheeling back again, and stood still in her shadowed corner, gazing through the parted draperies of the window into the street below.

If he, too, recognized her he gave no sign. An attendant soon appeared, with whom he exchanged some words as he gave him a card, then resumed his seat,—all of which Beth saw through those extra eyes some women possess in the backs of their heads. Soon the attendant returned, and she heard him say, "The lady is not in, sir. She left by the seven-thirty train, going north. Here is a note that was to be given you in case you called."

Mr. Palmerlee took the square missive as the servant withdrew, and, stepping under the central chandelier, slowly perused it. Then, slipping it into his pocket, he began to re-button his overcoat, turning slowly toward the door as he did so, though his

eyes were fixed upon the silent figure in the corner.

But as he made the latter movement, Beth, impelled by some impulse stronger than herself, turned and faced him, taking one quick step forward, while their eyes met in a full, deep gaze.

Something flashed across his face — was it joy, or triumph? — and he moved swiftly toward her. “You?” he said under his breath, then aloud, “I thought it was not a perfectly strange figure. I am fortunate in another chance meeting, Miss Merritt. You had no more difficulty, I hope, in reaching your grandfather?”

“Not any, thank you.”

“And he is not very ill?”

Certainly such interest in the aged and suffering was commendable in the young man!

“Oh, no,” a smile crossing her face, “Grandfather is always an invalid. It is a throat difficulty of some kind, and at times he has spells of—well, it’s like strangulation, somewhat. I think it’s purely nervous, though.”

His eyes answered the tolerant smile in hers. Youth and health always find age and illness so hard to believe in!

“Possibly. I presume nerves are at the bottom of most disorders. I should scarcely think the strong lake winds of Chicago would agree with him.”

"Oh, but he has just come, and we leave for Southern California tomorrow morning."

"Indeed!" He gave a little start. "To the coast, or the interior?"

"He means to try the coast first, I believe."

Another flash, of astonished pleasure, apparently, though instantly controlled, suddenly reminded Beth that she was outraging all the proprieties by talking in a public hotel parlor with an utter stranger.

"I had nothing to do, so wandered in here," she said, explanatorily, "but I really ought to go and write a letter."

He bowed, then broke out warmly, "I sometimes feel like quarrelling with conventionalities. We are both stranded here overnight, with nothing to do. My aunt, whom I intended to meet and take with me to the concert at the Auditorium, has been hurried through the city by a telegram, and I am left alone, with two tickets in my possession. There are to be some very fine singers, I understand, and young Kavanagh has a solo."

He gave her a beseeching look, under which Beth colored hotly.

"Oh, it would never do!" she cried with naive quickness, forgetting that a definite proposal had not accompanied the eloquent glance. "I love good music and hear it seldom, but—" she shook her head, so frankly regretful, yet so determined, and withal so charming, that the other could not remove his eyes from her face.

"I dare not urge it," he said gently, "perhaps because it would be so great a pleasure! Then I must say good-evening?"

Half timidly he now held out his right hand, from which he had been surreptitiously removing the glove, and Beth laid hers fearlessly within it. His smooth fingers closed about it firmly for one instant, his handsome face bent deferentially above it, then lingeringly, and with a last look backward, he went out and left her alone.

Beth hurried at once to her own room, her thoughts in a tumult. "If I could only have gone! Oh, these horrid proprieties! I know he is a gentleman, and I should have been as safe as with Grandpa. I felt as if I had known him always. He was so respectful and nice, now I shall *never* see him again!"

With a thoroughly dissatisfied expression, she fished her portfolio up out of her trunk, and sat down to her letter writing. But there seemed nothing to say, unless she filled the sheet with this young Mr. Palmerlee; and if she did, though she felt she had been discretion itself, the girls would be sure to misunderstand, and blame, or at least tease her about him. They could not see the perfect respect, and she might add, charm of his manners, nor could they realize, so far distant, just how great a sacrifice it had been to lose the opportunity of listening to finer music than often came in her way, when this pleasure was presented to her acceptance in so winning a manner.

“Well, I’ll tell them I reached here safely, and Grandpa is about the same,” she decided. “They won’t expect a long letter tonight. I’m tired, anyhow.”

So the one sheet sent to the expectant ones at home was short almost to curtness, instead of being lavish of detail, as Beth was apt to be, and gave nothing but bare outlines, without that more delicate shading we so long for in the missives of our best and dearest. Her mother read it twice with a puzzled look. “What can have come to my Beth?” she wondered. “This letter would seem to be eloquent only in what it does not say! I never thought her one of those people who can talk picturesquely, but shut up like an oyster when the pen becomes their medium; and surely my Beth would never mean to keep anything from her mother.”

CHAPTER VI.

CROSSING ILLINOIS.

THE morning found Beth's feelings modified. In its clear matter-of-fact light she saw plainly how impossible would have been such an escapade as she had longed after last night.

"What was I thinking of?" she wondered. "I declare, the man charmed away my reason with that air of his! I couldn't see at all what a fearful impropriety it would have been to accept of his escort. Well, it's a blessed thing that something gave me strength and sense enough to refuse him. However, that episode is over with, and I am not likely to have any more adventures, now that I shall be under Grandfather's keen old eyes all the time."

She was soon dressed and ready for their early breakfast, which Mr. Merritt had ordered served in his room, and half an hour later they were comfortably bestowed in a luxurious compartment of a first-class coach on a vestibule limited, steaming slowly through the unattractive suburbs of the city. Before this, as she stood, with her grandfather, on the platform a moment, while Calvin secured the tickets and checks, she had caught a glimpse of a figure

walking to and fro at some distance which suggested Mr. Palmerlee, but before she could make sure of it the crowd intervened, and she saw it no more.

"Really," she thought, giving herself a mental shake, "that man is beginning to haunt me! What has got into you, Elizabeth Odren Merritt, are you going silly over a young navvy?" and her head was carried higher than ever as she followed her guardian into the coach.

As Beth settled herself here, her surroundings seemed luxury itself. The soft, wide, comfortable seats, the broad plate-glass windows and paneled mirrors, the embossed leather and gilding, the attentive attendants bustling about, their yellow faces set off by the grey uniform, everything conducing to warmth, cleanliness, and comfort, pleased and interested her. She felt this was a different thing from a few hours' journey, this setting off in a long, serpentine home of many rooms filled with every appliance for easy living both by day and night; this meant the very luxury of travel.

A person could hardly look for adventures, though. All was too finished, too perfect for that. Thrilling circumstances seldom go hand in hand with luxurious ease, and the travellers' recitals which stir our pulses are scarcely those to be experienced in a modern vestibule, even though it be an "overland flyer." It is always thus; what we gain in civilization we must lose in romance and picturesqueness.

But Beth accepted the comfort philosophically, resolved to get something out of it, notwithstanding, for to her gay young heart each new day was a fresh page in life's book, sure to be written with some interesting incident before night.

They were leaving the city quite behind now, and rapidly covering the long miles of iron, belting the broad prairies beyond, when, happening to raise her eyes, Beth saw just before her, approaching from the forward end of the coach,—Mr. Palmerlee. For one instant she could not believe her senses, the next she could not doubt them; his eyes had met her own, and in them, mingled with a glad but covert greeting, was the plain question, "Shall I recognize you?"

Instinctively, she dropped hers with an almost imperceptible shake of the head, and passing her, he took his seat just across the aisle, one compartment further down. Beth glanced sidewise at her grandfather; he was deep in his newspaper. Calvin, on the opposite seat, was also reading his paper. Both were oblivious. She drew a long breath, and wondered what next? Was this Lester Palmerlee following her?

Time passed, and Mr. Merritt grew restless. "Calvin," he said, "did you get the 'Journal,' also? I told you——"

"Yes, sir, here it is," producing it from the pile of small luggage in the corner.

The gentleman looked it over for a moment, then dropped it. "Tell the porter to bring me a pillow, Calvin," he said abruptly.

The valet obeyed, and the sick man then addressed Beth, "Does it make you ill to ride backwards, Elizabeth?"

"No, indeed, Grandfather; would you like the whole seat?"

"I thought I might stretch myself a little. If you mind Calvin, he can sit somewhere else."

"I don't mind him at all, Grandfather; don't send him away for me."

She removed herself, with her loosened wraps, to the opposite chair, and felt guiltily that by doing so she was making possible an exchange of glances with the handsome stranger, now almost her *vis-à-vis*. She resisted the temptation awhile, looking demurely upon her paper, in which she read not a word; out of the window, where she noticed not a thing; or letting her glance wander idly over the coach. It was evident that in time she must succumb to the compelling gaze opposite, and when she did it was with a sudden blush, which thoroughly surprised and confused herself. Why had she blushed? What a ninny she was! and setting her mouth in a pucker of vexation, she again addressed herself to the uninteresting news before her. Yet, now and then, her lids would lift in spite of her and encounter that gaze which, if withdrawn, seemed always waiting for her own,—a gaze so wistful and tender, so

reverential, indeed, that she could not be offended, while she would not have been young, and a woman, if it had failed to stir her blood a trifle.

The mere passing glance of bold, impudent admiration Beth would have scorned, but in this was a subtler quality of adoration and desire, which spoke straight to her heart. After a time the train slowed up at some station, and Beth perceived a fresh, sweet odor floating about, which she soon traced to a boy now approaching her, who carried a basket of violets tied into pretty button-hole knots, which he was offering for sale.

With an exclamation of pleasure Beth stopped him and took a boutonnière from its bed of moss, then exchanged it for another which she imagined to be a prettier one, the boy passing on only to be summarily stopped by young Palmerlee, who, without an instant's hesitation, took up the blossoms she had rejected, asking the price.

The boy replied, suggesting another bunch as a "pootier" one, but was answered in a tone of decision, "No, I want this, thank you;" and as he passed on with his fragrant load, Palmerlee pinned the tiny nosegay carefully to the lapel of his coat, then turned, with an unconscious air, to the window.

But the cessation of the train's monotonous rumble had roused Mr. Merritt from his nap, and he sat up to gaze blankly about him. "What place is this?" he asked, at length, addressing nobody in particular.

Palmerlee bent quickly forward with a respect-

ful air, mentioned the name, and added, "We have nearly reached the Mississippi, I believe, sir."

"Ah, thank you," rising to shake the rheumatic kinks out of his long legs, which he finally stepped into the aisle to accomplish more thoroughly.

Here his eye lit upon a magazine lying beside the young man, and he evidently tried to scan it with his aged eyes. The young stranger surreptitiously pushed it a trifle nearer the aisle with his foot, that he might see it better, and Beth, watching the kindly little act, felt a new respect for the handsome youth.

After a fuller survey, Mr. Merritt spoke with some eagerness. "I see you have the 'Forum,' sir; is it the last number?"

"It is, yes, sir. Would you like to look it over?"

"Thank you—if you are sure you were not reading it. There was an article I began before I left home, and my man stupidly forgot to bring the magazine, nor could we procure it at the depot newsstand. Much obliged, I'm sure!" taking the volume eagerly offered by the other.

Then, as his glance fell upon a name boldly pencilled on the cover, he started slightly, and looked up with his keenest glance. "Lester Gordon Palmerlee; is that your name, young sir?"

"It is," replied the other with a certain pride.

"And for whom are you named, may I ask?"

"For my uncle," smiling a little at this catechism, "my mother's brother."

"And he was Lester Gordon, M. D., of Eastville, Virginia?"

"Yes, sir."

The old gentleman took a step forward, and the younger moved along and made a welcoming gesture toward the vacated place, at which Mr. Merritt obviously dropped into it. "We were college chums, Gordon and I," he observed in a reminiscent tone, "room-mates, too, though I was some years his senior. He was the brightest lad I ever knew. You favor him a little, though he had a more rugged look."

"They tell me I am very like my mother, and she, too, resembled him, I understand," said the young man, in a gratified tone.

"Is he not living?"

"No, sir, neither of them. I lost my mother when an infant, and Uncle Lester died two years ago."

"Strange! I would have said he could count upon twenty years more of life than I. But you can't tell — you can't tell! Sometimes the sufferers far outlive the robust. Did he ever marry?"

"No, sir, never. He and my father lived together for many years, and a cousin, Mrs. Hickson, kept house for us. I always called her 'Cousin Nance.'"

"Yes, I knew her, too. We met once at his home. She was a pretty girl, bright and gay. Well, well," — a softer look than usual crept over the old man's

wrinkled visage, — “how small the world is sometimes. Lester Gordon’s nephew! And do you still live in the old town?”

“Oh no! I can hardly remember it, indeed. We moved to Raleigh many years ago, and now the home has gone to strangers. Father only outlived Uncle a few months; I was at the Naval Academy when both went.”

Mr. Merritt noted the grave face and softened voice with approval. “So you are alone in the world, my young friend?”

“Quite alone, sir. I graduated last summer, and am now going west to join the Coast Survey. My duties call me to the Pacific Coast.”

“Indeed? We are bound that way, also, in pursuit of health. I have a troublesome bronchial complaint which seems to baffle the skill of our best physicians, and as a last resort they have sent me to Southern California. We are likely, then, to be travelling companions for some time, Mr. Palmerlee.”

“I hope so, sir.”

“I have my granddaughter with me — as you may have noticed?”

The young man colored as he muttered something about having observed as much, and Mr. Merritt continued, “Yes, a nice, quiet girl. You must make her acquaintance.”

“I shall be most happy,” returned the naval officer, venturing one swift, irrepressible glance at the bent, blushing countenance across the aisle,

where, as he well knew, Beth was having full benefit of this conversation.

It was evidently the habit of our young officer to strike while the iron was hot, for, seeing Mr. Merritt now begin to handle the "Forum" somewhat longingly, he said with his winning smile, "May I not have the pleasure of hearing your own name now, sir, — as well as that of your granddaughter? No friend of my dear uncle's could be indifferent to me."

"Why, certainly, certainly! Did n't I tell you? My name is Merritt, Mr. Palmerlee; have you ever heard your uncle mention it?"

"I've heard him talk about Josh Merritt, sir, and laugh about the good old times he used to have with him," giving the old man a glance and smile that were half audacious, half deprecating.

At this Mr. Merritt really laughed outright, not with his usual dry cackle, but with a hearty, enjoyable note. "Yes, yes," he nodded, "that's the name. Josh Merritt — ho! ho! — how it takes me back!"

Beth, whose eyes at least could not help taking a share in this unusual merriment, now rose to let her grandfather pass into the seat, and he said cordially, "See here, Elizabeth, I want you to know this young Palmerlee. His uncle was once my best friend. 'T was 'Les' and 'Josh' then, ha! ha! and we were two merry lads together. By the way, I suppose there is some handle to your name, being a naval officer; is it Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," bowing with grave politeness to Beth, "but you know that does n't count. I am still plain Mr. to my friends."

Meanwhile the elder man rambled on, "Well, if you're like your uncle, that's all right! A bit mischievous, perhaps, a dare-devil even, at times, but clear grit to the bone, sir, and the biggest heart in all the world!" Then, bethinking himself, he added, with his ordinary air of stately ceremony, "My granddaughter, Miss Merritt, Mr. Palmerlee."

A pleased, flashing, triumphant glance passed from the brown eyes to the grey, saying telegraphically, "The barrier is down at last; we can be friends!" then their hands touched across the grandfather, and the young man observed smoothly, "As I remarked before, we are nearing the river, and will soon cross a bridge which is quite a wonder of engineering skill. Would you not both like to go to the rear of the train and take a better look at it as we pass over?"

"No — oh no — thank you! I can see well enough from here, but I presume Elizabeth would enjoy it. Young people always like frisking about. Meanwhile I'll just run over this article, I believe," and he bent over the "Forum," immersed at once in its pages, while Mr. Palmerlee leaned toward Beth and said gently, "May I have the pleasure, Miss Merritt?"

CHAPTER VII.

NEARING THE COAST.

“IF yesterday had been today we might have gone to the Auditorium, after all.”

This remark is by Lester Palmerlee, as the two stand at the rear door of the last coach, while the wonderful bridge they have come to see is already growing small in the distance. Beth, her hand on the door-knob, gazes backward through the broad plate glass, while her companion, for the moment, leans lightly against the gilded wood-work and looks down upon her.

“Perhaps,” she half admitted finally, “but I’m not sure. Was it very fine?”

“I cannot tell you, Miss Merritt, for I did not go.”

“And why not, pray?”

He smiled at the brusque air with which she wheeled upon him at the words, but hesitated to answer. Could he tell her the truth, that a certain new-born, possibly over-strained, sense of chivalry prevented his enjoying what she had been unable to share? No, assuredly not; so, after an instant’s hesitation he answered, “I detest going to such an entertainment alone. It doubles the

pleasure if you can share the fine points with another. There is something dreary in the thought of sitting out such a thing by yourself, and laughing or crying over it all alone. I'd rather stay away."

Beth gave him a quick, amused glance. "*Do* you laugh and cry with the singers? So do I. So silly! And sometimes I'm actually drowned in tears over a touching little story. It makes me so ashamed! Now Clit—my oldest sister, Clarissa—will read aloud the saddest, sweetest things without a tremor in her voice, or the moistening of an eyelash, and say, when she has finished, 'Really, a tender little thing, though slightly overdrawn, don't you think?' exactly as she'd say, 'Really, a tender bit of steak, but slightly overdone, is it not?' while I am drenching my handkerchief, and trying to keep my sobs from being too audible, in the very darkest corner I can find."

He was watching her speaking face so absorbedly that Beth noticed at length, and at once grew uneasy. "We must go back," she said, "Grandpa will wonder what has become of us—then, did you go home last night and pout the whole evening away?"

He smiled at her quick transitions, but followed her without difficulty. "I'm afraid that is about what I did do; at any rate I went to the hotel and I suppose pouted man-fashion by sitting with

my hat over my eyes and talking to nobody. Then I wrote a business letter in which there was same hard scolding before I retired."

"All very wrong!" admonished Beth, shaking a dimpled finger at him. "You should have gone and enjoyed yourself, and afterwards been gentle to all the world—are you coming back with me, or shall I go alone?"

"Never alone if I can help it," murmured the dazed young man, as he followed.

"I did n't hear," cried Beth, over her shoulder, "there's such a rumbling," and he thought perhaps it was as well she did not.

As the days passed, the acquaintance flourished, till the Merritts and Mr. Palmerlee became as one party. There is a nearness in long railway travel even greater than that of steamer voyaging, which induces rapid intimacies, and many a match (presumably begun in heaven) has been brought to its consummation over these great western lines. A man has constant opportunities to show his helpfulness and chivalry, a woman's sweetness of temper and powers of entertainment are brought out here, if ever, and what could better lighten that monotony which would else make the days at least forty-eight hours long, than the sweet, shy intercourse of two young hearts merging by almost insensible degrees from friendly acquaintance-ship into the warmer intimacy of love?

It became the most natural thing in the world

for Lester Palmerlee to greet Beth each morning with some little gift. Now it was a flower, now some new periodical raced for at a way-station, again a bit of luscious fruit; and always the eager smile and gentle, flattering word. Of course he sat with her, took her out upon the platform for a restful promenade during the necessary delays at remote stations, pointed out the finest bits of scenery, and even read aloud to her at times, while she lazily lounged against her cushions and listened, delighting in his musical voice and perfect intonation.

In return, Beth was her own sweet, bright, girlish self, now admonitory, now helpful, again, perhaps, wilfully perverse, for the nonce, but in his eyes always charming. The girl never stopped to analyze her feelings for him. She liked him, of course, but so did she like Thorne, and under similar circumstances would have been exactly the same in her manner to him. It was quite evident, also, that her grandfather had taken a penchant for the youth, and there was nothing left for her, apparently, but the easy cordiality of a friendship properly chaperoned, and agreeable in itself.

As to Palmerlee's feelings, not many would have been deceived. He had never questioned them, himself, for a moment. To him Beth was simply the most lovable, most fascinating, girl he had ever met, and, if he could, he meant to

win her for his own. With love's proverbial blindness he could see no fault in her. Her girlish arrogance was simply a piquant and saucy manner, delightful in one so young and charming; her abrupt ways of withdrawal into herself at unexpected moments when she felt tired or bored—seldom manifested these days, however—was merely a maidenly reserve beautiful to witness. Indeed, just now Lester was in that state of slavery which is a phase of love-making with many men, and which, to keen observers, often suggests a reaction to something very like tyranny further on.

One day, as they were passing through a canyon of the Rockies, with the cliffs looming up on either side till they seemed to touch the sky, Beth, seated just before him in the observation-car, drew a long, almost gloomy, sigh.

He leaned forward, his hand upon her chair. "Why that sigh, Miss Merritt?"

"It—it oppresses me!" giving a little impatient shake to her head and shoulders. "I can't bear to be so hemmed in. I feel as if those rocks were going to fall and crush me. Oh! I love liberty, space, freedom. I could bear almost anything better than to be 'cribbed, cabined, and confined.' The very thought of it makes me ill!"

"It is something you need hardly fear, no one would want to tame *you*, Queen Bess. You are too charming in your present state of wildness!"

Beth threw him a half contemptuous glance over her shoulder. "How some men will seize upon the slightest opportunity to flatter! Really, you never let one pass — now don't say I give you them, that would be cruel! But to resume our muttons, it would not be well for any one to try and enchain me, for I should struggle fearfully. I am like somebody; was it Patrick Henry? 'Give me liberty, or give me death!'"

"I echo the sentiment," said her companion gravely, "are you not the personification of liberty?"

Beth was silent. When he took that tone it was difficult to turn his words into mere persiflage. If the words were light there was a depth and intensity in the way they were spoken which silenced her. So both looked down the narrow gorge, rapidly closing to a mere slit behind them, and said no more, though their hearts beat a little faster amid the high-pitched chatter of the other sight-seers around them.

It was at these moments that the young girl's whole inner nature cried out for her mother. She felt as she used to, when, a little child, some difficulty confronted her. It was well enough to insist upon freedom when all went smoothly, but in perplexities she felt her weakness. It was then, and only then, she could be utterly submissive to another's will, and so far in her short life that will had been the gentle one belonging to her mother.

"If I could only see, and talk with her," she

thought almost remorsefully, "but I have not written anything before, and now I don't know how to begin, or what to explain," and, as often was the case nowadays, she abruptly turned the conversation, talking fast and furiously when once she had begun.

Mr. Merritt's first destination was Los Angeles. Here he intended to rest for a time, while informing himself as to climate, localities, and desirable residences nearer the coast. Lester Palmerlee also had business here, and as a matter of course, took up his quarters at the same hotel. It would be some time before his services would be required upon the survey, and it was with a mind thoroughly at ease that he devoted himself to these new friends as they went about the quaint and beautiful old town. Mr. Merritt, however, with the impatience of invalidism, longed to be domesticated somewhere, and soon hit upon a place which seemed to combine most of the comforts he longed for.

This was in easy distance by direct train from Los Angeles, and still nearer Redondo Beach, a strip of coast-line quite unknown to fame, where some of the old Californians still lived their feudal lives in barbaric splendor, though elbowed uncomfortably by the new Californians, hailing directly from "daown east," who were rapidly crowding them into closer quarters, breaking in upon their time-honored customs, and filling their slow, enjoyable days with some of the feverish haste, and incessant money-getting, of their own nineteenth-century existence.

Here, in the midst of a fragrant orange-grove, was an old hacienda to let, with an Indian woman in charge, who would serve the new Señor and Señorita (so the dignified owner informed our friends) "with a devotion unto death," to say nothing of her being an excellent cook and laundress, besides. It was agreed that the party, including Palmerlee, should run down to look the ground over before completing the arrangements, however, and one superb morning (where all mornings are superb) found them steaming out of the city in a south-westerly direction, bound for the coast.

Beth, who was extremely sensitive to phases of the weather, felt like some sublimated image of herself as she sat at Lester's side gazing out upon the exquisite views from the open window at her elbow and sniffing the various blossomy odors in a very rapture of content. Turning, with the happiness of her mood transforming her face into positive beauty, she met his eyes fixed upon her with the softened gaze he reserved for her alone.

"You must not grow too unearthly," he said rapidly, "I will not have it! If this air is going to sprout your wings, we shall whisk you back to the cold and gloom of our middle states again. When you have that transparent, uplifted look you make me tremble. What a sensitive soul yours is, Queen Bess! Do you feel all things so intensely as you do the changes of the weather? Do hate, and fear, and joy, and—love, play upon your heart-strings

and sway your moods as the sunshine and spring breezes do? Are your feelings deep in these matters, too, or do impressions touch you lightly, and depart as easily as the wind plays on an eolian harp? Come, tell me."

Beth laughed mischievously. "How poetical! But haven't I heard something like it before? Did you put it in quotation marks, Mr. Palmerlee? You should! How do I know what the depths of my nature are? I know I love my friends, but as to hating—well, I've never felt the need of so strong an emotion, except against spiders. I do just loathe them, and I cannot help it! And sometimes I think I have felt joy that was deep and real—but sorrow? Of course it's grinding to have to wear dyed dresses, and there have been times when it rained picnic days, or my new hat was unbecoming, but sorrow—no, I have not known sorrow yet, I'm sure."

"Lucky mortal!" breathed Palmerlee.

"Yes, but if it's all to come? And it must come, I suppose. There has never been a life without it, has there? I wonder what shape mine will take when it comes."

"Don't!" cried the other, with a pained look. "I can't bear to imagine it, even!"

"I hope," Beth went on musingly, "that it will not be disgrace, or the loss of any of my powers, or my liberty. One ought never to be quite miserable who can preserve self-respect, health of body

and mind, and freedom from any hateful bondage, ought one?"

"Hush, child! You make me shudder with your matter-of-fact tone. Talk of the scenery, why don't you? See how green those foot-hills off to our left are, and how graceful their outlines. And oh, look! look! We've rounded the curve, and there is the ocean at our feet."

Beth did look, gave a cry of pleasure, and was quite still. She had never yet looked upon a broader sheet of water than the little lake near her native town, and as she now gazed out over the blue expanse lying majestically calm under the brilliant sunshine, but with the calmness of a grand, self-contained woman, who can be roused to a very tempest of passion upon occasion, she forgot all they had been saying, and felt herself grow small and insignificant before Nature's greatness.

Palmerlee watched her intently, thinking only, "How quick she is to feel and understand! How her eyes talk, and what exquisite, expressive lips! If a man could win the glances she might give, the kisses those lips are capable of, it would be worth dying for."

He did not say worth living for, strange as it may seem, but drew in his breath hard and sprang to his feet so suddenly Beth looked around, her eyes still deep and dreamy from her long, fixed gaze seawards. He answered her unspoken question.

"Did I disturb you with my haste? We are almost there; the train is beginning to slow up. Let me take that hand-bag; do you prefer to keep your parasol?" For Beth had a rebellious little way of declining to resign her special belongings, saying she would never be impeded in her movements by giving into another's hands the comfortable possessions she might better keep within her own.

They stepped from the train at a smart little station-house beautified by outlying flower-beds, and found awaiting them an odd vehicle which somewhat resembled an old-fashioned chaise mounted on a buckboard, into which the three climbed somewhat clumsily, Palmerlee finally disposing of himself by the driver in front.

"Well, Elizabeth, how do you like the looks of things?" asked her grandfather, leaning forward on his cane to take a more comprehensive view of their surroundings. "That gentleman I was talking to coming down in the train used to live near here, and he says our hacienda was once a grand place, now fallen to decay somewhat, but still habitable. The Indian woman in charge was born on the estate. Let me see, he called her 'Tessa,' or some such name, didn't he? You know these old Spanish Californians had a way of making excellent servants of the savages, and this woman speaks both Spanish and English, and is quite a character, I imagine."

Beth only nodded an answer, and let him ramble

on in the descriptive fashion he enjoyed, for her eyes were upon the ocean, in full sight of which they were jogging along over a shelly road which followed the curving shore close to the edge of a low bluff, beneath which the waves came hurrying in with their gentle swishing, like the frou-frou of silken skirts, leaving but a narrow strip of sandy beach between. Shading this road was an occasional eucalyptus tree with its up-standing, leathery leaves, so greedy of the sunshine as to absorb it from both sides at once, while now and then a yucca threw the sharp shadows of its lance-like foliage across the whiteness of the path.

"It is all so different, like another world!" she murmured, as he paused to give vent to his hard, dry cough, that sounded like the cracking of an unsound nut. "I sometimes feel as if I must be in a dream, from which I shall waken to find Lala calling me at the foot of the stairs to my owl's nest, and Clit waiting to read me a lecture and send me on an errand the moment I descend."

Palmerlee looked around. "Yes, like those dreams where you're trying to get somewhere, and can't!" he remarked in an impatient tone. "Is there no way of prodding up that animal of yours, my boy?" turning back to the small, half-breed driver. "His appearance is certainly 'dream-like;' does he always go to sleep in harness?"

The boy, grinning, applied a broken-backed rawhide, and the "animal" made a feeble spurt forward.

As they progressed, the shore lowered until, after they rounded one of the many curves, it led them gently down to a broad and beautiful beach of clean, white sand, forming a perfect crescent, unbroken by cliff, or boulder. Following this for a considerable stretch, they at length turned abruptly inland, and almost at once struck into a delightful alley-like way, thickly shaded with live oaks, between the branches of which were frequent glimpses of a fine plantation ahead, into which the road wound invitingly. Its last few rods led through an orange-grove, then stopped abruptly in an open space given over to grass and flowers, all surrounded by a hedge of vivid scarlet geranium nearly as high as a woman's head. Passing between two large rounded stones which defined the opening in this hedge, they drew rein before a large adobe dwelling surrounded by wide galleries, made fragrantly beautiful by blossoming vines, which partly shaded a number of open doors leading into the cool darkness of the interior.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OLD HACIENDA.

A DUSKY shape came forward, and a pleasant, middle-aged face of cinnamon-brown smiled a welcome. "Is this the hacienda of Señor Perelli, called the Santa Ysabel?" asked Mr. Merritt, with unconscious pomposity.

"Si, Señor," answered the woman, dropping an odd sort of courtesy, more stately than graceful, "the padrone, he gone 'way. Coom in."

They entered, finding themselves at once in a large, square room, too dim at first, after the glaring sunlight without, for them to perceive what it contained. As Beth stepped across the threshold, a strong shudder shook her from head to foot, and Palmerlee, close at her elbow, observed it instantly.

"It is too chilly for you — there is such a change from the outside warmth — allow me," and snatching a light wrap from her arm, he wrapped it closely about her, his fingers lingering as they touched her shoulders.

Beth controlled her shivering and sat down, with a curious glance about her. In deference to previous guests with advanced ideas, the earthen floor had been boarded over, and even a strip of carpeting

laid through the centre, while two or three rockers and a leather-covered couch gave some promise of comfort. But the sun-baked walls were rough and unadorned, the fireplace (merely a brick hearth below a square hole let into the smoke-blackened chimney) was without shelf or ornament, and the windows, opening inward upon hinges, boasted not even a calico curtain.

Pushed back into one corner, though, was a table most exquisitely carved, and finished with polished brass feet, while over it was carelessly draped a rich-looking green cover, thick with gold thread and embroidery. An opening close by, leading to some other apartment, was hung with a gay Navajo blanket; another, fitted with a heavy door which stood wide open, gave a glimpse of an inner court, where Beth caught shadowy visions of waving palms, and vines of gorgeous coloring. In a moment she stepped to open the door and gave a little gasp of delight, for what she saw was a small quadrangle, its earthen floor beaten to the hardness of stone, while its surrounding walls were a mass of living green, glowing with great clusters of luscious heliotrope, and radiant verbena, against which the deeper hues of a row of low palms with waving, sword-like leaves were thrown into startling relief. Indeed, for the moment, she seemed almost blinded by this magnificence of coloring, and unconsciously shaded her eyes as if from the too ardent sun of noonday.

Her grandfather's call broke in upon her dream of beauty, and bade her follow, as Tessa was about to show them the place; and Palmerlee's voice, close by, remarked in delighted surprise, "What an ideal garden! One might almost imagine himself in an old Spanish court. You like it, Queen Bess?"

"It is intoxicating! Somehow, it does n't seem real; perhaps it is that overpowering odor of heliotrope, but I feel in a dream. But come, they are leaving us behind."

At Mr. Merritt's request, they first went through the hacienda, so far as they could, for the northern and western angle, forming two sides of the court, was locked and given over to spiders and decay. The eastern front only was kept in repair for possible tenants, while upon the south side, cutting through the sheds used for cooking purposes, was a wide opening leading to a neglected garden a step or two lower than the yard, which extended some feet before them, like a terrace. Here the ground was swept clean, and held a row of bee-hives ranged along the sides, while at one end was a huge bake-oven built of sun-dried bricks, and at the other a poultry-house. As they crossed this terrace, after finishing the inspection of the buildings, and went down the few crumbling steps, Beth drew back a little, for the whole place, with its circuitous paths and tangled masses of shrubbery, gave her a chill feeling of depression.

"How melancholy, oh, how melancholy!" she

exclaimed. "Even those blazing geraniums cannot enliven it. What makes me imagine it might be a graveyard, I wonder?" gazing about with drawn brows.

"It is sadly neglected and overgrown," replied Lester, to whom the remark was addressed, Mr. Merritt and Tessa having already disappeared down one of the labyrinthine paths, "but perhaps it is owing to those great, fierce-looking cacti, and to the olive trees scattered about. There is something in that cold, pale-grey green of the olive which is depressing, I think; then, too, it is all deeply shaded, and those baked earth paths winding about are anything but cheerful."

"It is grewsome!" shuddered Beth. "Look at that tangle of vines over in the darkest corner, with a broken-down seat under them. It looks as if there had been a tragedy in that corner!"

"Why, Miss Merritt, you are nervous! If you dislike the place so much, you should tell your grandfather; I am sure he would not take it if he knew."

"Oh, are you?" said Beth with fine sarcasm. "Then I'm not! Grandfather will simply not even think what I like. If it pleases him, here we come and here we stay; I am but a passenger. But who said I did not like it?" in an annoyed tone. "Did I? It is as beautiful as it is ugly; it attracts and repels; it warms and chills me. I don't want to come, yet I know I shall be quite miserable if I do

not, for the place will haunt me, and I shall always regret it."

"Well, I swear!" broke out the young man.

"I would n't," admonished Beth, with a shrug. "It's as vulgar as it is sinful, and I could n't have it around me, you know. Besides, what is there to swear at? I am as I am — take me, or leave me, but don't find fault, or break into profanity, I beg!"

The words, carelessly spoken, struck fire with a suddenness which surprised Beth. "Do you mean what you say — do you, Queen Bess? May I take you, or leave you? Tell me I have the alternative, and my happiness is made!" He bent forward to seize her hand, but she moved lightly aside and avoided his touch.

"Yes, take me to the court, or go on with Grandfather," she said coolly, "I don't like it here;" and something in her manner convinced him that he must curb his tongue for today, at least.

In fact, Beth was nervous and fretful. She knew it herself, and the knowledge only made her more so. There were a great many things troubling her, but the chief was her attitude toward the dear ones at home. Beth had always been considered almost too outspoken there, yet, like many frank people, she could keep her own counsel when she chose, though she would probably tell you she did not often choose. For, though she had a way of repelling undue curiosity, she also liked often both to excite and

gratify it. As to the secrets of her owl's nest, over which they laughed, it was generally thought there were no secrets, but that Beth's retirements there were simply to such sleep or reading as she wished quite undisturbed, and that she but kept up the fiction of employment for the pleasure of a mystery. But that reticence was not like this, and she knew it.

Her letters, full enough of other things, had skipped one subject with a pertinacity that could not be attributed to chance. Once she had said, "Among other pleasant passengers is a Mr. Palmerlee of the navy, who turns out to be the nephew of a college chum Grandpa was fond of." This was all the mention she had made of this ever-present young man, except once to name him, well bunched with others, in detailing some excursion about Los Angeles, or elsewhere. To be sure there had not been time for many letters in the fortnight since leaving home, yet when she thought what a growth this friendship had made in California's fostering sunshine, and how small a space it had been given in her semi-weekly letters, her conscience reproached her sharply.

Last night she had seen her mother in a dream, and upon running to her with outstretched arms, and a glad cry, the sweet, loving face had been sadly averted, with a significant glance beyond the daughter's form. Turning quickly at this, Beth's dreaming eyes had met Lester Palmerlee's smiling upon her. The sharp pang of mingled pain and joy

she had felt then wakened her, and the dream could not be quite banished, even in the daylight. Was she doing wrong? Ought she to tell Mother? But what could she tell her? That Mr. Palmerlee went with them everywhere, and whispered odd things, and looked odder ones, and — Bah! could she ever stand the laughter, and comments, and teasings of those five women? And then the lips, which were Beth's great beauty, would press themselves together, like the lids of a strong-box when some treasure is inside, and the combination forgotten!

As for the home people, they had settled down to the fact that Beth was not over-communicative on paper. Her descriptions of people, places, and scenery, were vivid enough, to be sure, but the minute she touched upon her own impressions and emotions, she became vague and lifeless.

"Perhaps," thought her mother, "she feels too deeply to speak of it. I can understand that. There is a certain soul-modesty which forbids us to bare our inmost feelings, even to the closest friend, and what she might express alone with me, by eye and tone, frightens her when it takes shape from her pen. Yes, that is it. Beth will have all the more to confide in me when she gets back," and so she forbore to ask too searching questions when she answered the disappointing letters.

Mr. Merritt found as decided a charm in Santa Ysabel as Beth's was undecided, and soon had com-

pleted his arrangements with the proprietor, who only visited the place occasionally, leaving the care of it to a neighboring Spaniard, who rode over from his rancho daily on a shaggy mustang, to oversee the few men employed in its orange-groves, and the greatly diminished acreage of grain and alfalfa. For the once proud estate, swarming with herds, and waving with plenty, had been sold off, strip by strip, since the death of the señora, its mistress, while the four sons had married and moved away, to imbibe American ideas and love of money-getting, until the old feudal life was become but a memory, and the plantation a mere country-seat, in possession of the oldest son, who sometimes brought his family down here to rusticate near the coast during the hot months, but oftener let it to strangers.

Before the week was ended, the Merritts took possession. Beth, assisted gravely and methodically by Calvin, soon rearranged the rooms more to her satisfaction, adding the various views and knick-knacks they had picked up on the journey, until their gloom and stiffness gradually softened into a really home-like air, without loss of that certain quaintness and dignity a Californian interior will often possess. Each of the four square apartments opened upon the wide outer gallery, as well as the inner court, and these two open-air apartments formed the real living-rooms of the family. Upon the outer veranda, added to the gay rugs, and wicker chairs and table, sent down by train, was a cane settee, heaped with

bright cushions, for Mr. Merritt, and a scarlet and yellow hammock for Beth, while a couple of great ollas, or water-jars, kept well heaped with ferns, pampas grass, or blossoming branches from the orange trees, gave an oriental effect to the scene. The court was also made habitable in much the same fashion.

Beth was so busy with all these housewifely cares for a day or two that she scarcely thought of Palmerlee, except now and then to wonder how such or such a thing would please him; but when all was in order, and the domestic machinery moving smoothly, she began to feel twinges of loneliness.

It was Saturday, and the third since they had taken possession. Her grandfather was asleep upon the settee, Calvin off upon an errand to the nearest village, and Beth standing near one of the square veranda pillars, glancing rather impatiently about her. Could she go to the beach, or must she stay here, in case her invalid should waken? Inclination pulled strongly one way, but firm Duty held her to the other. She sighed and yielded to the latter, seating herself in a low rocker, and drawing a magazine toward her from the wicker table close by. But she had scarcely opened it, after a languid, uninterested fashion, when she saw coming into view around the curving drive amid the orange trees a figure no one could mistake for the spare and angular frame of Calvin, a youthful, well-developed figure, in light clothes, with a little cane switching

at one side as it advanced with a springy tread that gaily spurned the distance between.

The magazine dropped, and Beth sprang to her feet, then reseated herself, only to rise again, throw a quick glance toward her grandparent, and step briskly down the steps to meet Lester Palmerlee. "Don't waken him!" she whispered, with commendable anxiety. "He's asleep, and Calvin's gone; come through on your tiptoes to the court—I dare not go out of call."

Palmerlee smiled to himself, and followed her like a cat, till they had nearly crossed the intervening parlor, then stopped in the half-gloom and turned to her. "You are glad to see me, Queen Bess? Confess, now! I saw you spring up, and I'm sure there was a flash of joy in your eyes—*do* own up, like a good girl!"

"Well, of all the wheedling voices! Of course I'm glad in this stupid place; who wouldn't be? Nobody to speak to but Grandpa and Tessa (though, by the way, she is an interesting creature after a fashion), for Calvin does n't count; he only says, 'Yes, Miss,' and 'No, Miss.'"

"O Beth, say you're glad just because it is *me*."

"Who gave you leave to call me Beth, sir? Besides, you do not use good grammar."

"You would drive Job into a passion, you saucy little thing! Tell me you're glad it's I, then," laughing musically at her expression; and

when one has such a pretty nick-name as Beth, I thought," coaxingly, "it might sound pleasant so far from home. I know to hear myself called Lester—by you—would give me the keenest delight."

"Pshaw! We have n't known each other a month yet. Don't you think this room improved? Oh, yes, and do tell me—I can't be quite sure—is that bit of scarlet silk drapery too gorgeous? The room was so dim and ghost-like before, but if you think it's too vivid—Grandpa always says, 'Very pretty, Elizabeth!' without looking, and Calvin smiles like a wooden image, and—"

"Are you talking against time, Miss Merritt?"

Beth darted a glance at him from under her lashes, and felt a twinge at his hurt face. "I only wanted your opinion," she said meekly, "but this room is depressing; come out into the sunshine!" and as she held back the tinkling Japanese portière Calvin had hung yesterday, to partially conceal the rough portal, she gave him a smile so sweet and friendly that the young man's heart thrilled with rapture.

CHAPTER IX.

TESSA'S STORY.

BETH soon made acquaintance with the sea, which was within easy walking distance, and as Lester was now established in a fine new hotel at Redondo Beach, a few miles distant, from which he took daily rides about the country, it is small wonder if he often met her there. It was a charming little beach, this of Santa Ysabel, though so lonely and unknown, being smooth, curving, and silvery white. Beth had also discovered a nook which seemed formed on purpose for a dressing-room. A couple of yuccas, growing near together, had been bound about and interlaced into a regular bower by a Spanish creeper, above which the bayonet-like leaves bristled a warning to all intruders. Here she could safely slip into her bathing-dress, unseen even by the birds, and wade far out into the shallow water with no fear of treacherous hollows, nor of the deadly "sting-ray," which does not haunt this special shore.

Then, added to the delights of sea-gazing and surf-bathing, Beth soon found another charm, for farther on, where the coast became more

broken, with shell deposits and out-croppings of rock and limestone, she soon discovered a mine of wealth in the shape of beautiful stones and crystals scattered freely about, from the tiny "shirt-stud pebble" so richly grained, to the more exquisitely colored tourmalines and rubellites; while an hour here would seem but a moment in her eager quest after these treasures.

Daily, too, the charm of the quaint old hacienda, with its drowsy surroundings, crept over her spirit with the subtle fascination of an opium dream. She learned to love the dim, cool rooms, and to revel in the quiet court and the comforts of the gallery. She finally felt the charm even of the old garden, all run to weeds as it was, for she discovered that the wildest growths are oddly beautiful in that marvellous climate; and when she had explored the corner with the broken seat, which had at first called forth an expression of dismay, she found its tangle of vines of so delicate a foliage, and bearing such great clusters of odorous blossoms, that she would not rest till Calvin had nailed the old garden-bench into apparent security, and having made it gay with an afghan woven in Roman stripes, she often came here to read or sew, when there was no question of her grandfather's needing her.

If tired of her own society, she would be sure of finding Tessa busy with the poultry, or the beehives, where she was quite ready to answer ques-

tions in her soft voice and patois which seemed alike devoid of harsh notes or consonants.

"Tessa," Beth would begin, wheedlingly, "what a beautiful fellow that great white rooster is, but does n't he lord it over the rest, though? I'm sure it was he who reduced the tail feathers in that little Dorking so shamefully. The big rowdy is always urging the little one on to an encounter, but Mr. Dorking wisely feels that

'He who fights and runs away,
May live to fight another day.'"

A soft, pleased laugh, as Tessa tosses her last handful of corn to the brood, then she nods a "Yes, Mees, he bad to fight—zat China cock—an' what would ze poor lee 'le Dorkeen anainst heem? It moos be I shut heem oop zoon, eef he no do better. Will ze señorita take one chair—yes?"

"Well, thank you, I believe I will sit down a minute. What a large place this is, is n't it? How long have you lived here?"

"Fum fo'ever, Mees."

"Indeed! Were you born here?"

"Si, Señorita."

"Oh, tell me about it, Tessa! The times when you were young, and the family lived at home, and all, won't you, please?" and the woman, with a soft, gurgling laugh, is not loath to slip down into an old flag-seated chair, while Beth drops upon the stone bench, all alert.

Reducing Tessa's speech to our sharper pronunciation, one of her narratives was much as follows: "It was gay those times, Miss, and the hacienda had no fast-shut rooms. No, indeed, nor locked doors at all, save for the two sleeping chambers of the young señoritas, which you see further down the wall, Miss, where there are no doors which open upon the piazza; for it is well that a young maid of good family should be kept close, and the inner door upon the court—that is quite enough! It was then the good custom to lock the young señoritas into their chambers at the fall of darkness, unless it was by great favor that they did stay up for the fandango, at times.

"The padrone, he was good man, though weak in the health, but his señora, ah! she was strong and ready at all things, and we did understand that if the orders came from him, yet she it was did make them. He was handsome man, and wore a dignity well to see in the padrone of a great rancho, with much flocks and herds, and the land so wide that one could not so much as cover it in three days' ride.

"It was then that my Paolo have charge of the sheep rancho in the foot-hills of the Madres to our north, and he was much good Indian, with a horse and money, and straight as the pine, lady, and he could tum the mandolin till every nerve would quiver with delight!

"This hacienda was not built up so large then,

and what is the court now was but a part of the yard, all open to the sun, but when our good young maestro, Señor Pedro, did marry, then it was the south rooms were added and the court enclosed, for his bride was truly a great lady of much magnificence, and a rich family, and with jewels—ah! Señorita, the dazzle of them was greater than that of the snow-line of the Madres when the sun does rise upon them at the dawning.

“But she was proud, Miss, so proud! and she did think there was not good enough for her in a mere hacienda, for in the town-house from which our Pedro did bring her was ver’ grand things, with curtains of silk, and pictures to the walls, and carpets to the floors. Truly, till Pedro did build these rooms there was naught but the earth floors here, lady, and we cared not. For why will not the earth do for only to be trodden on, when swept hard and clean? But, no, my young señora, she must have floors of wood, and carpets much too fine for foot of man, and the hangings which were rich enough even to make altar-cloths for the churches—yes!”

Beth had a swift thought of the exquisitely carven table, with its embroidered cover, in their parlor, also of a dainty bamboo toilet-stand in her own room, which seemed incongruous amid their surroundings, and asked, “Did she occupy those rooms we have?”

The Indian woman nodded. “Si, Señorita, the samea.”

“And was that her dressing-table with the bamboo frame and the faded yellow silk draperies?”

Another nod.

“How romantic! Well, do go on, Tessa. I shall enjoy the rooms ever so much more now. To think I am really using the possessions of a Californian belle and heiress of those quaint times! Was she beautiful, Tessa?”

“Like the tall lily of the annunciation, Lady, pale and quiet, with eyes that held the fire like punt-wood, and a slow, still voice that was like the stillness of the sea before a tempest, Señorita. I was her maid then, for I was little and quick, and my laugh was merry. She had thought to bring the gran' maid of her town-house, but the damsel fell ill and could not be moved, and when I had served my mistress for a time, she said, ‘No matter; I will keep the little Tessa; she pleases me. I am *muy contente!*’ She said it, the proud señora, she was *muy contente!* And truly, I served her well.

“I have tell you that our madrone, she was the real maestro of the rancho and kept each well to his tasks, for her nature, it was that of a miser-man, hard and close, yes! But she did have one tender place in her heart and that was her love for her youngest son, Bernardo, a wild handsome lad who could not be kept in bounds even with a lasso! But him the madrone loved well, and his coaxings would open the purse-strings and soften the heart of her when all other means did fail of it. When he

came in, all splendid in his silver spurs, and the yellow sash about his gay-fringed buckskins, ready for the rodeo, and stooped to kiss his madre for addios, she would gaze upon him with a softened countenance, and never till the cavalcade of dashing rancheros was gone in a cloud of dust would she cease to gaze, with one hand shading her eyes of adoration.

"She did not so greatly love the good son, Pedro, however, though always he did her bidding well, and for his fair young sposa she had only aversion and coldness. Sometimes this did make my young mistress ver' sad, for truly when the madrone is not your friend, the hacienda, it is not home, Lady. She would spend many hours by herself in the garden, which was then all well tended and from weeds kept, and she did often sit on that old seat in the corner, which is now so much broken, and sing low songs to her guitar, till the tears would fill my eyes for her sorrow. But ever she was respectful and kind to our mistress, and gave her the deference due the madrone of a great household, and there was peace and fair words between them, if not the love that should be.

"So a year went round, and Bernardo did not cease his scrapes, nor his wildness, and the padrone grew careworn, and the madrone was pale, with a fierce trouble in her eyes, and Pedro looked sad and perplexed, and rode much hither and yon. I knew a good deal of it all, for when my Paolo was down

from the foot-hills for the fresh stores, he would whisper to me the things he had heard and seen, and I knew it was much feared the reckless boy was joined to a gang of desperadoes who were doing wild, and harmful deeds about the country. It was in those days the Vigilantes were established, Señorita, and they were ver' strong in their order, and did punish with stern swiftness when they caught one in crime, nor waited for much of law or justice at all, then.

"One day, I heard the young señora in talk with Bernardo, and she seemed to be pleading with him, while the tears were in her eyes, but his answer was light and merry, and he leaped upon his mustang and, as he struck spurs, he threw a kiss back for parting, and cried out, 'Have no fears, my sister! I am bold and dread no man, but for your interest I thank you!' and so rode gaily away.

"It was the month of the sheep-shearing, and all were busy at the river day after day, but the evenings were gay for us maidens, because of the young rancheros, and the music and the cachuca, but when life is the most gay then be sure the jealous sorrow is lurking near, Lady, for truly it is so more often than we dream.

"It was evening, when the pleasure was at its height, and the guitars and mandolins were tinkling merrily, while the padrone and his señora looked on with serenity, and bade us to the feast of fruit and tortillas later. The court and yard were gay with

flambeaux, but the garden was in shadow, save where the moon streamed across its open paths, and Paolo drew me from the noise and clamor to a nook we knew, where all was soft and stillness and shade. As we reached it we heard voices just beyond, and peeping out between the vines, with my hand on Paolo's arm to still him, I could see two figures in the dimness sitting on that bench over in the corner among the olives.

“‘It is my mistress and Señor Pedro,’ I whispered, at which Paolo shook his head.

“‘But no, we left our young maestro talking with Bettina.’

“Then I wondered much, for who could be thus in talk with the young señora, but even as I wondered I heard her cry out sharply, ‘Oh, quick, then—quick!’ and seem to drag the cavaliero forward.

“This did bring him into the moonlight where I could better see, and I whispered, ‘It is Señor Bernardo, and my mistress is in terror! What has the boy been about now, then?’

“Even as I spoke thus there was the thud of horses’ hoofs and the clatter of spurs down the driveway, and then I heard the despairing cry of Bernardo, ‘It is the Vigilantes!’

“For an instant we breathed not, while the mandolins in the court played gaily ‘The Maid of Sevilla,’ and the loud voices of the young rancheros took up the chorus, as they rattled the castanets and

pounded the tambourines till the whole place rang with the noise of them.

"Then the señora bethought her. 'Here!' she said quickly, and snatched from her shoulders the long mantilla to throw over his head and coat, all gay with the silver braid and buttons. 'Here, my Bernardo, is the key of the señoritas' apartments, now empty. It is profanation that a man should there enter, but they are thy sisters, so hurry to hide thyself while I hold the pursuers at bay, here!' and as she pushed him down the path, I caught him by the hand and ran with my swiftest step, and laughed out loud and gay, as if we had been two maidens in frolic; and just as I pushed him within the room and locked fast the door upon him, the cavalcade came dashing around the bend of the drive where now stood our young señora, tall and haughty, to greet them.

"The leader dismounted and lifted his hat with courtesy, but only to say, 'Señora, you had best step inside, for we must search this rancho till we find three of the gang of Manuélo de Castro, who have fled here for shelter.'

"'What!' cried our señora. 'Those desperadoes—and here, sir? In the home of the Perellis? But this is an insult! Paolo, go at once and summon our padrone and his sposa, and you, Tessa,' for I was now trembling beside her, 'see that the maidens are safe in their apartments this moment!'

“‘I have but now tried the lock, my Señora, and it is fast,’ was my answer.

“‘Then to your search, gentlemen!’ she said quickly, for she knew well my meaning. ‘Our padre will oppose nothing to the great Vigilantes,’ and she bowed with a stately grace as she moved from the pathway.

“She had but turned when the padrone appeared with his sposa, both pale and affrighted, but my young mistress said calmly, ‘Have no fears, madre mia, these cavalieros would seek some men of the wild De Castro’s band, and surely that cannot to us matter! Shall not Paolo, and Pietro, and those of our most trusted rancheros aid in their search, also?’

“Then, seeing her so cheerful, their fears were allayed, and the padrone became at once the courteous host that he was wont to be, and led the party here, there, and elsewhere, free to show them each corner of hacienda and garden. He even called for the keys of the señoritas’ apartments, but the leader said, ‘No, we will not disturb them. It is plain you have no men lurking about here, but—where is your young son, Bernardo?’ and as he questioned, he turned sharply upon the good old man.

“But the padrone answered with calmness, ‘It was yesterday he started for Los Angeles to buy fresh supplies for our rancho, and he should return on the morrow. Would you wish him to join in this search when he is back again?’

“But the leader made no answer, except to

mutter an oath below his breath, and we saw with great joy that he soon called off his men, and departed. Then said the good padrone, while he sighed with relief, 'How glad am I our Bernardo was safe on his journey! I like not their coming here thus; it would seem that the boy is in mischief once more.'

" 'I hope not!' cried Pedro, 'for now the country is roused, who can save him?'

" But the madrone only wrung her hands, and moaned, 'O my Bernardo, my Bernardo!' for all her boldness was gone in the face of this trouble.

" Then my mistress stepped forward and said sweetly, 'Madre mia, listen! Our Bernardo is here, safe and, I hope, penitent. I have the key — take it, and you will find him in the maidens' chamber, that has been empty since the little ones left for their schooling at the mission.'

" The madrone looked in astonishment, and could scarcely believe her. 'Here? In our locked room, and safe from pursuit? How came it?'

" Then I proudly told of my lady's quickness in concealing him, and how calmly she had met the Vigilantes; and when the madrone heard she gave a cry, 'Maddalena, my daughter!' and took the young señora into her arms and her heart, and there was no more estrangement between them thereafter!"

" That was lovely!" cried Beth with enthusiasm. " But what became of the naughty Bernardo? Was he really guilty?"

"Not of any great crime, Lady, but he had been too much in bad company and was wild and lawless. But now he was well frightened, and the lesson did cool down much of his bravado, while his mother's grief and his sister's kindness so touched his young heart that he was ashamed and repentant. After much talk together, he told them if he might but go with the Americanos, and learn to do things as they do, he would be more steady; so his padre took him to 'Frisco, Lady, and there he became one ver' fine man, and was himself a magistar just lately."

"I hope he made a good one, Tessa, and remembered his own youthful follies, when tempted to be too hard upon others! But which of these brothers is the one I have seen, Señor Perelli, our landlord?"

Tessa's great black eyes glowed with affection, as she answered, "The one you know, lady, is our good maestro, Pedro, now the head of the Perellis, for the good padrone is in heaven these many years."

"Señor Pedro, indeed! I must have a good look at him next time we meet him; but I long to see his sweet wife, Maddalena. Does she live in Los Angeles, too, Tessa?"

The black eyes were shadowed with sorrow now, and the raven head gravely shaken. "She lives, indeed, in the City of the Angels, little Señorita," was the soft-spoken answer, "but it is the one up yonder!" and Tessa pointed reverently to the deep blue dome above them.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE GARDEN.

THE coast survey was now delayed by the illness of an important officer, and Lester Palmerlee rejoiced in secret, while enjoying the gaieties of the great hotel at the Beach, and the subtler delights of those hours spent daily in Beth's companionship. Since hearing Tessa's story the girl had taken a great fancy to the garden-seat, and here the young man found her, one still, delightful afternoon, sweet with an indescribable mingling of odors. She made a pretty picture in her white gown, leaning back against the gay Roman stripes of the afghan, while a bit of fine needle-work dangled from one idle hand; and his eyes devoured her with rapture as he advanced.

"Oh!" she cried, sitting upright. "Who told you I was here?"

"Calvin, my ladye faire. Why? Is this a retreat sacred to the muses, and to you?"

"No, hardly. But I am growing to love it well. I must tell you the story Tessa told me, and then you, too, will appreciate the spot."

"I need nothing more than your presence to make me do that."

"Thanks! Where will you sit down, I wonder—on the ground?"

He gave a rueful look around at the dusty soil, and she relented enough to add, "I'd let you take the afghan, only 't will soil it so."

"Much obliged!" sarcastically. "Such solicitude does me honor."

"Solicitude for the afghan? I don't see how. Of course it's a trifle out of style, and all that, but it has its uses!" her pretty mouth dimpling mischievously.

He ignored the question, and broke out, "You might let me sit on the bench; there's room for two."

"Well," edging along a trifle, "if you'll sit still. I can't bear wriggly people."

"I'll try not to wriggle," gravely. "Is this my side?"

"Certainly."

"Don't look so severe," he murmured beseechingly. "I assure you I'm making myself as small as possible. There! Are you crowded?"

"Not *much*," with resignation. "Well, now I'll tell you—" and the story was rehearsed, but possibly lost something of the charm Tessa's quaint recital had imparted to it, for Palmerlee listened quite unmoved, apparently.

"Well;" cried Beth with some sharpness, as she ended.

"Well?" woodenly.

"Why don't you say something? Why don't you get excited, and ask questions, and exclaim? I did."

"Cause I darse n't!" in a school-boy whine.

"Why not?" laughing, in spite of herself, at his ridiculous look and tone.

"You said I must n't wriggle."

"O you goose! Is there no happy medium between a stick of wood and an angle-worm?"

"Caterpillars?" suggested Palmerlee, throwing one foot over the other with a relieved sigh. "That is more comfortable, thank you! Queen Bess," dropping his nonsense with overwhelming suddenness, "do you know I am expecting my orders every day, and then — what then?"

"Why, you 'll have to obey them, I suppose," picking up her needlework in some haste.

"And leave you! Beth, how can you be so excited over the story of somebody else, and so indifferent to our own? Don't you care if I leave you?"

"Yes, it will be lonely," she murmured.

"Lonely! It will be desolate, forlorn, intolerable — for me. How will it be for you, sweet one? No, you shall not run away," catching her hand as she was about to spring up, "you must listen! Beth, I love you! I love you! There's no use keeping back the words that I have been saying with my eyes for weeks past. I love you.

O Beth, darling, do you comprehend all that means when it comes from an earnest man's lips? Look at me, and say the same in return."

Though he still held her hands in a fiery clasp, she had drawn as far away as possible, her face aflame, her eyes drooped, and her brow corrugated with perplexity and pain.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she entreated in a low voice. "Let me—let me—think. Give up my hands, I tell you!" her voice growing loud and fierce; and, wrenching them from him, she buried her face in them, and muttered, "You are cruel to say this!"

"Cruel? Cruel to tell you how dear you are to me? Good heavens! child, what can you mean?"

"But it's so—sudden!"

He laughed a little. "Sudden, Beth? It has been an age! Why, darling, I loved you the moment I saw you, and have been holding back the words ever since."

"Not two months, all told!" Beth burst out with indignation. "And it was so nice—the other way. I didn't want any change."

"But surely, dear, you care for me?"

"I suppose so."

"But don't you *know*, Beth?"

"Oh, I don't want to know! I liked you, and we had good times, and it was all right, but now—there'll be Grandpa to tell, and the folks at

home, and *such* a fuss!" Her voice was quite pathetic. "Besides, I'm not old enough, yet. Why could n't you wait?"

"O you silly baby!" He drew her close, and raised one of her dimpled hands to his lips. "But Beth, dear, nobody need be told yet, if you say not; only we will understand each other—that is all. I will be very good to you, my darling, and all my happiness lies in your hands."

A certain manly ring in his tone pleased the girl, and she swayed a little toward him, a dangerously sweet look in her uplifted eyes. He would not have been the ardent young Southerner he was if he could have resisted it. Before she divined his purpose she was in his arms, lip to lip, heart to heart; and such a kiss, to her, could be no less than the seal of their betrothal.

"Beth," he whispered, while he still clasped her, "say you are mine!"

"I am yours," she answered solemnly, and in the triumph of that avowal he overlooked the fact that she had not once returned his earnest words, "I love you."

When he did remember he comforted himself with the thought, "She never does anything quite like other people. Of course she loves me, but she will take her own time and way to say it. She is a bud which cannot be hurried into bloom—my beautiful Elizabeth!" and, judging by his

own affection, which though of such rapid growth had struck its roots deep into his nature, he could not doubt of hers.

When he came, next day, Beth met him with a timidity so different from her usual princess airs that her lover hardly recognized his betrothed. She was swinging in the hammock on the veranda, no one else being visible, and informed him that her grandfather was not feeling so well, and was lying down in his own room—all with down-dropped eyes and flushing cheeks. He came close and dropped a quick kiss upon her hair.

"I hope Mr. Merritt will soon be better," he remarked dutifully, "but I can support his absence!" Then, under his breath, "Dearest, do you love me?"

A nod answered him, and Calvin's lank figure in the doorway prevented further endearments. "Beg pardon, Miss Merritt," said the man, in his most funereal voice, "your grandfather is feeling pretty bad, and I'm to go to the village for a doctor. Could you sit with him awhile?"

Beth sprang from the hammock with no lack of readiness. "Why, yes, of course—" but Palmerlee interposed.

"Wait! I'll go for the doctor, Calvin. My mustang is out here. That will be much better."

"Why, thank you, sir, if you could! Mr. Merritt really needs me."

"Very well, then, I'll hurry. Beth"—as the man disappeared—"you don't seem to care. I could have sworn you were glad!"

She looked at him in a meditative way. "I believe I was," she said coolly.

His look would have melted a stone.

"Lester," she said, and he brightened at the name, "I do like to be with you, only sometimes you startle me. You hurry me so!"

"I will be gentler, dear. Perhaps I am a trifle impatient, but you shall teach me how to woo you properly. I did have something to tell you, a queer incident in my life, but it will keep. May I come to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes, but you must go now. Sometimes these attacks are alarming, and you have two miles to ride."

He went at once, with only a wave of his hand for adieu, as he sprang upon his stocky little beast and galloped down between the orange trees, while Beth hastened to her grandfather, to find him looking really very ill. It was, however, a short attack, and the worst was over before Lester returned with the physician. Beth being busy in the sick room, he could get but a word with her before he was obliged to go, but her manner then was so subdued and sweet that he went away content.

Mr. Merritt seemed quite feeble for days, and Beth found herself leaning more and more upon

her friend and lover, who was as attentive as a son to the old gentleman, and anticipated every wish of hers. If it was not love she felt for him, it was at least a most tender regard, which it would have been hard to distinguish from the real passion, and Beth, having made her surrender, seemed satisfied and at rest.

There are some natures almost selfishly generous, if such a paradox be admissible. That is, they so largely find their own happiness in doing for others that they sometimes do, and give, more than is best for the recipients, thus weakening the one they most desire to strengthen and assist. Lester had something of this nature, while Beth, "loving to be loved," could far more easily receive what she did not really care for than risk the pain of refusing it. So both drifted, unthinkingly, into relations of which neither fully realized the solemnity just then. They were helped to this by the isolation and romance of their surroundings. Life was all a dream in that sun-kissed land — why struggle, or resist, or question? Far easier just to drift through the long, lazy days, happy in the moment, and equally forgetful of the past, and careless of the future.

Once, as they sauntered dreamily over the white beach at twilight, Beth reminded Lester of the words he had said about having something to tell her in regard to his past life, and he answered, "Yes, dear, but not tonight. It would jar upon the sacred stillness of this hour. Sometime, when we are alone

and have a long afternoon before us, I will tell you all."

"Is it so unpleasant, then?" murmured Beth.

"It was for me, but it is over with, and I hardly think it will affect you greatly, yet you ought to know. Listen! Some one out in that boat has a guitar, and is singing."

Beth stood still to catch every note as it floated softly over the still water, a Spanish madrigal sweetly carolled by a young voice. As it ceased, Lester drew her closer, and they continued their walk in silence till he broke it with the question, "Have you said anything yet to your grandfather?"

"About ourselves? No, Lester. He has seemed so weak, and sleeps so much, I have not found a good opportunity; but I think he knows."

"Most likely; he is a sharp old gentleman, and we have made no concealments. You have written home, of course."

"N—no."

"Why, Beth! And why not, pray?"

Beth laughed nervously. "The truth is I don't dare! It will seem so awfully precipitate to them. You see, I began all wrong, for I scarcely spoke of you at first, and only occasionally of late, and now if I tell what you are to me how startled they will be!"

"Why didn't you speak of me, dearest?"

"I was afraid of their chaffing — Lala especially. And why need I hurry now? I will mention you oftener, leading up to it gradually, and then —"

"That isn't like you, Beth. I have always thought you honesty itself."

"I *am* honest!" indignantly, "but I believe even honest people sometimes have secretive streaks in them. I know I have. They could never get me to tell about my owl's nest at home, and I had a doll once when I was very small that I kept hidden for months, and loved and played with always in secret. I don't know why, but some things go too deep with me, are too intimately sacred, to be talked of, even to my dearest. I am so afraid of a tactless touch upon the tender spot, of a look or breath that will jar the tensely-strung chord, that I shrink into myself whenever I approach the subject, and my lips seem glued together. I cannot help it; I am made so. It is doubtless a weakness, but it is a weakness that is part of me, just as that tiny mole on my left cheek is, and I can no more rid myself of one than of the other."

A smile lighted the young man's face as she spoke, not of amusement, but rather of surprised delight; and when she ceased, he asked quickly, "And am I an 'intimately sacred' subject to you then, love? If so, keep the dear secret always, if you will; I will never chide you for it, I am sure!"

Beth was still for a time, evidently deep in thought, then she answered gravely, "I think it must be that, Lester. At any rate I have always dreaded to write of you; but of course I must now, and I will — soon."

CHAPTER XI.

LESTER PLEADS HIS CAUSE.

"**T**HERE is no time but the present"—none that can be counted upon, surely. Of the next week Beth could never think, except as one recalls a tumultuous, confusing dream.

Two days later, as she sat musing upon the garden bench, Lester came to her with a lagging step, and a face out of which all the color had been strained by some deep emotion. She started up, affrighted.

"Grandpa?—" she began, but he made a dissenting motion with one hand.

"No, Beth, ourselves!" came in a hoarse murmur, as he dropped upon the bench beside her, unchidden now, like a man stricken down by some blow.

"For heaven's sake, Lester," she begged, "tell me what it is. You frighten me!"

"Beth," crushing her outstretched, imploring hands between his own, "Beth, my love, there has an order come—plans are changed—I am to go—I am ordered to South America—to Chile."

"Not where the fighting is? O Lester!"

He bowed his answer, then straightened his head proudly. "Don't think for a minute I mind the

fighting!" he cried in a clearer tone; "it's the leaving you. O Beth, Beth! 'tis love makes me a coward now. Think what may happen before I see you again!" and unconsciously he wrung her hands till Beth must have winced with the pain of it but for the greater pain tugging at her heart-strings.

Going to Chile, to distance and danger, to fighting and tumult! Her woman's heart yearned over her lover, then, as if he had been husband and child in one. "O Lester! I can't—I can't have it! Why, they may kill you, love!" and, snatching her hands from his clasp, she threw both arms about his neck, and sobbed out her grief upon his breast.

It was the first caress she had ever given him, and the young man, drawing her closer with unspeakable tenderness, sat awed into stillness by the contest of joy and pain which rent his soul. She loved him. And he must leave her. All happiness, all sorrow, seemed comprised in those two sentences. After a little they could talk more calmly, and Lester told her the order was imperative, and the time short.

"We shall not probably be called into action at all, dearest, so do not let that trouble you; but we are to cruise along the coast and watch over our country's interests. I must leave you tonight!" he added, with almost a gasp.

"Tonight? Oh, that's sudden! Tonight? O Lester, and Grandpa so poorly!"

"I must, dear ; it is the fate of a soldier, a marine — God help us ! But Beth — "

"Yes, dear."

"I hardly dare speak the words I long to," fixing his beautiful eyes upon her with piercing intensity, "but could you — would you — *marry* me before I go ?"

"*Marry* you !" Beth managed to suppress a shriek.

"Yes, love. Are we not promised ? You would be my wife next month, next year, — what are months or years to a love like ours ? We are one in soul now and forever ; we only need God's and the law's sanction upon our sacred union. With that I could go so much more cheerfully ! I could feel then that I had a home to come to after my exile ; for where you are is my home ; and if I were wounded, or ill, I could send for my wife to come to me."

"You said you would not have to fight," murmured Beth, reproachfully.

"Probably I shall not have to, but no one knows what may happen in war-time. There are such things as chance shots which do as great execution as any." (He certainly did not mean to let her underrate any danger he might be speeding to !) "And, if worse came to worst, I could feel that what little I have to leave behind me could go without question to the one I love best on earth."

"Oh, I don't want *that!*" shivered Beth, hiding her face.

"But I *want* you to have it, Beth! No one has a nearer claim. It is not much. The old homestead in Virginia, and an investment or two —"

"Don't, don't talk about it!" urged the girl shrinkingly.

"Well, I won't, then; but tell me, dear, can you give any good objection to our marriage?"

"Yes, indeed! Mother and the girls."

"*Would* they object? Do you really think they would dislike me?"

"No, Lester, I don't; they could n't! But how dreadful for me to do this thing in such a seemingly underhanded way!"

"But your grandfather shall know, child. Is n't he your natural male guardian?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Beth, listen. It was ten o'clock when I came into this garden. By ten o'clock tonight I will be in the train, speeding eastward to join my ship at Charleston. We have less than ten hours together now! Do not make me spend even one of this short, short time in useless pleading. Agree to leave it all to your grandfather. I will go to him, and tell our story, and we will abide by his decision — do you consent to this?"

Beth wrung her hands. "O Lester, I don't know! I don't know! *Is* it right? You hurry me so! I'm like a bit of wood in an eddy; I can't get

my bearings at all — I can't think or plan. Oh, you are a man, braver and stronger than I; don't take advantage of my weakness, my indecision! Lester Palmerlee, act for me as before our Maker and Judge."

Her face, white and grave almost to sternness, was raised to his; her shaking hands clung to his arms. Both had risen, and as they stood thus, face to face, confronting the most momentous problem of their young lives, each felt a thrill of terror at the greatness of the crisis. It made Beth sway toward him, faint and ill; it filled him with the strength of love and manhood, and the purpose of a life-long protector. Placing his arm about her, he raised his right to heaven, and swore solemnly to love and cherish her so long as life should last; but Beth took no vow upon her lips. Then, seating himself, and drawing her gently down beside him upon the bench, he awaited her answer.

"Go!" she whispered finally, and turning, buried her face in the cushions, while he hurried down the garden path, his step ringing clear on the hard, sun-baked earth. It was almost an hour before he returned, and Beth raised a white face to meet his. In his eyes were traces of tears, and he spoke in a voice broken by emotion.

"He has consented, darling, at last! He likes me, wants me for a grandson; but, like you, felt the suddenness and strangeness of it all. But now he believes it is best. He is fond of you, Beth, dear, I

did n't know how fond. His words, fairly commanding my tenderness to you, broke me all up. As if any one need lay down the law to me there! But I liked him the better for it. He told me what he expected to do for you sometime, — he is generous, Beth, — and we arranged all the preliminaries. I will be here with a minister at two this afternoon, love, and our bridal trip shall be a long ride, if you like. Then, perhaps you will invite me to tea with you, later? But come, now, and receive his blessing. I never saw him so soft and tender — come."

His voice had grown gayer with every word, and his eyes shown brilliantly through their moisture, but Beth tried vainly to reflect his smile. She felt the heaviness of sleep upon her — a mental sleep, which seemed to deaden all her faculties — and took his arm mechanically. He gave her a swift, anxious look, and asked abruptly, "Beth, don't you love me? Would you prefer *not* to marry me?" stopping her under the shadow of a coldly-green olive to await her answer.

She gave it dully. "Of course I love you, but I'm so — stunned. I can't rouse myself, somehow."

"Poor child! No wonder. It is sudden and surprising, and you are not so used to these unexpected changes as I am. When you are the wife of a sailor, you will learn to take them calmly," and he led her across the yard into the palm-shaded court,

where her grandfather, seated in his reclining-chair, awaited them.

The two approached him with a measured step, not a sound breaking the stillness, except the shrill sawing of a cicada, hidden in the vines. The old man eyed them attentively, — Palmerlee tall, proud, radiant; Beth shrinking, white, and still. As they stopped before him he asked gravely, "Elizabeth, is your heart in this matter?"

"I believe it is, Grandfather."

"Then, my dear, may God bless you, as your grandparent does! My child, I married my wife in much this way, and it was a blessed union. May yours be the same."

He drew her to him, and kissed her with much tenderness, then shook hands with the young man, saying heartily, "I know *you* are not making a mistake, Palmerlee, and I don't think Elizabeth is; but at the best it is all a lottery — all a lottery!"

His cough stopped him, and just then Calvin appeared in the parlor doorway. "Tessa asks will you be served, sir? And where?"

"Tell her to bring the luncheon in here, Calvin; there's a cool wind off the sea today, but we don't feel it here. You will remain, Palmerlee."

"I have much to do, sir."

"I know, but you must eat, and I have hurried the meal on purpose."

"Thank you, sir. I will gladly stay," and with a long relieved sigh, the young officer sat down.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MARRIAGE.

HALF-PAST one found Beth in her own room, trembling in the hands of Tessa, who, delighted with all this excitement, had constituted herself lady's maid for the nonce. She felt that something of that old, intense life was come back to the hacienda, these days, and found a delight in Beth's romantic love-story which, it is to be feared, was not shared by its heroine. Certainly, the girl looked anything but radiant or bride-like, as she sat shivering on one of the hard chairs before the señora's pretty dressing-table, huddling a white shawl about her bare shoulders, and replying in monosyllables to the eager woman's questions.

"Will my little señorita have ze twis' of hair as ever this day, also?"

"Yes, Tessa."

"Joost ze samee as ordinaire?"

"Yes."

"Um! There is then a twis' an' a loop—so—zat is sharmin', but eef it no please ze señorita—"

"No, Tessa, do it the same as usual."

"Ah well, wiz ze orange-flower it will be mooch pretty—yes. Now, it is ze gown nex'?"

Beth nodded, with a gesture toward a simple white muslin, thrown carelessly over a chair. But at this Tessa demurred. In the open trunk could be plainly seen the dainty primrose silk, where it had lain unused since Beth's arrival; that silk into which the sisters had put so many stitches, and wrought so many hopeful wishes, — a gown with a tender thought in every fold, and a fond memory stroked into each gather. Upon this Tessa pounced at once, and drew it forth.

“Ah! but zis is ze one. So fraish, so new! Surely, carita, you will not that half-soiled slimzy wear, when zis so lovely silk is here — ah, no!” holding it up at arms' length and looking unutterable things above it.

Beth began an imperative, “No, no!” that ended in a nervous laugh. There was something indescribably funny in Tessa's look and attitude, and before she had recovered from the half-hysterical outburst, the delighted tire-woman had clapped it over her head, and was securing its fastenings in haste, admiring and exclaiming every instant. Beth yielded as she had yielded all day, too dazed to assert herself, and when Tessa completed the costume by fastening an orange spray upon her corsage, and another in her hair, then begged her to turn and look, she stood a long minute before the mirror, gazing with a deep intensity upon the fair image it reflected.

Was that herself? Little Beth? That pale, still, luminous-eyed creature, who looked so strange and

splendid to her? Had this summer-land thrown an enchantment over her that she should be living through such unreal, unexpected happenings? Could home, mother, and sisters be living, loving realities when they seemed as remote from all this life as if upon some other planet?

She would have liked to pinch herself hard, and see if it would hurt, in order to test her flesh and blood identity, but Tessa was watching, so she only turned away, and said dreamily, "What next?"

For answer came a light step and quick rap, then the call, "Beth!"

Tessa flew to throw the door wide, and Palmerlee entered in uniform, looking handsomer than Beth had ever seen him before. Her heart warmed to the gallant young fellow. The chill which had possessed body and brain reacted in a glow that brought comfort and strength to her soul. She held out her hands. "O Lester, how fine you are! I've been so—so forlorn. Say something to help me, please."

His face flushed with emotion as he took the hands in his own. "My poor little love! It's a hurried, trying time for you; I know that! But you have saved me from such despair and wretchedness as I pray you may never know. In all our life, be it together, or apart, Beth, remember that. You are making me as happy as a man can be who must soon leave his all behind him; doesn't that comfort you a little?"

"Yes, Lester. A thing cannot be both right and wrong, can it? If I am doing you good I cannot be doing any one else harm, surely. Is the minister waiting?"

"Yes, and his wife. I begged her to come as a witness."

"I am glad of that," said Beth. "Come, I'm ready," and they passed out together.

It was in the pretty Moorish court that they were married. The small company stood sociably about the pair, Mr. Merritt on Beth's side, the minister's young and pretty wife on Lester's, with Calvin and Tessa a step removed. The grandfather gave the bride away, and to Beth's surprise, there was even a ring, which she was afterwards much touched to learn had been her own grandmother's and was removed from Mr. Merritt's watch-chain, where it had hung ever since his wife's death, and given to Lester, "in order," as the old gentleman observed, "that my granddaughter may not lack any form customary to the usual Christian rite of marriage." He also was the first, after the new-made husband, to bestow his kiss and blessing.

So eastern-born Beth, who had "never had anything happen in her life," was married in a Spanish hacienda on the Pacific Coast to a naval officer whom she had never seen or heard of three months since, by a minister utterly strange to her; her wedding party consisting of a serving-man of Scottish nationality, a Spanish-Indian woman, and a

lady whose name she had not yet learned. Is it any wonder if she failed to take it all in that day?

After a few polite interchanges of compliments and congratulations, the proper documents were signed, a light collation of biscuits and fruit was served, and the minister and wife made their adieux. Beth turned from their last hand-shakings to the little table where the marriage-certificate lay, and lifting it, began to read over the names penned below; then looked up quickly, with a startled exclamation.

"What is it, Beth? It is all right, surely!" cried Lester, stepping forward.

"But did you see this name?"

"The minister's? No; why?"

"It is John Thornton Lewis!" gazing at him with dilated eyes.

"Well, is that so unusual a name, my sweet wife?" drawing her hand through his arm, and leading her slowly into the parlor.

"No, but——" she stopped, and that strange instinct of secrecy came over her again; why enter into details in which he would not be interested, though they meant so much to her? So she finished the sentence——"but a part of the name is familiar. It belongs to a friend at home."

"It is a common enough one," carelessly, "and now, dear, I have the best-looking horse and phaeton I could find, waiting for us outside. Shall we start

on our wedding-tour? I hope you won't have to change that pretty dress first. By the way," mischievously, "one would think you had come all prepared with a trousseau! I don't see how anything could be more bride-like and beautiful than this dainty costume."

Beth blushed pinker than the silk. "It was for my evening gown. I told them I should never have an opportunity to wear it, and they little thought, while we were laughing and joking over it—O Lester, Lester, Lester! I feel as if I had stabbed them to the heart. I'm a wicked, wicked girl! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

The storm had broken at last; the confusing dream was ended. Conscience and Memory were lashing her into horrid wakefulness, every nerve acute to agony. Her frightened husband caught her swaying form and held her with firm tenderness, hushing her sobs against his breast, and soothing her with soft, caressing words. At length the strong clasp helped her, she began to feel the tenderness, and she leaned upon him like a tired child, while the paroxysms gradually died away into gentler weeping. When she could listen to any connected discourse, he told her the incident of the ring, and the pathos of it helped to steady her.

"So it was Grandmamma's?" she murmured, when he finished, gazing down upon the little circlet through wet eyes. "That makes it seem more true and right. Grandmamma's own wedding-ring, and

Grandpa gave it up for me! It makes me feel better, somehow — at least this ring is real.”

“O Beth, our love is real! Can anything be more true than that?”

The thrill in his voice shamed her. “Dear,” she whispered, “you are too good for me! I mean to be your faithful, loving wife.”

“But will you be my happy one?”

“Surely not while you are gone; you wouldn’t like that!” smiling up into his face with the coquetry that was a part of her nature. “Wait till you come back for *that*. But come now, we will go for our ride. Forgive my foolishness, Lester, I’ll promise not to trouble you again!” and once more his doubts were smothered.

It was a long, objectless ramble they took, down one road and up another, letting the horse choose his own gait and direction, but this quiet converse of hours brought calm and comfort to Beth’s distracted heart. There was a charm about her young husband which was irresistible, and his love for her carried all before it. They talked of their so short present, and their long future. Lester went into details of his life on shipboard and in port, told her at what points of the journey he might have opportunities to send her news, and at what places he should look for missives from her. He pictured the home they would have by and by, where he might spend his furloughs in sweet content, and of that future when he might command a ship, and

take her upon his cruises. He touched lightly upon his absences, and dwelt long upon their blissful reunions.

Then, delicately, he broached the subject of her support. "You must listen, love," he urged earnestly. "I shall send you a remittance from Charleston, and others later. You are my wife now; mine to guard and mine to cherish, a sweet and sacred charge. O Beth, if you had been adrift upon the world as long as I, you might begin to understand what it is to me to look forward to a wife and a home all my very own. I thank God for you every hour! It is your memory will keep me straight and strong—O Beth, Beth! Was there ever a woman so worshipped as you?"

They were still for awhile, and the horse zigzagged along the shady road bordered by live-oaks, while both mused over this close, strange tie binding them together for weal and for woe. By and by Beth said softly, "You have never told me yet that odd—or was it unpleasant?—circumstance in your life, Lester; tell me now."

"Not today, Beth. Don't let it spoil these golden hours that are so short—so short! I'll write it to you. I can write it best, taking plenty of time to explain it all. Let it go! It is all over, and cannot affect us now," and Beth did not press the matter.

Dusk was falling when they returned, and Tessa,

standing at the turn of the road, was evidently watching for them; for, as she caught sight of the somewhat lumbering vehicle which held the pair, she turned swiftly toward the house, and they could see her dark form flitting through the grove before them. Then, of a sudden, a light gleamed from the gallery, then another and another, until the old hacienda was all ablaze, blooming out with Japanese lanterns like a German garden on a Saturday night! Evidently Calvin and Tessa had been busy. Beth laughed almost blithely. This little attention pleased her wonderfully. Lester rose to his feet, gave a sailor's cheer, and urging on his sleepy steed, the wedding party drove up in triumph, to be met by Calvin's stately "Welcome home, Lieutenant and Mrs. Palmerlee! Welcome home!"

Tessa said nothing, but grinned and curtsied, rolling her eyes about like a Chinese mandarin, and even Mr. Merritt called out a cheery welcome from his easy-chair. Then they saw that the tea-table was spread with the best of everything, and garnished with flowers, till it looked like a square posy-bed.

"Really," cried Beth, "this is too much. I do begin to feel like a bride, indeed; and, Grandfather, dear, I'm ashamed to say I am actually hungry, though it seems as if we had done nothing but eat all day long."

"Ah! but the young señora, she would nothing

'ave at all," broke in Tessa quickly. "It is now she will make good cheer — yes," and she bustled about, seating the wedded pair side by side opposite Mr. Merritt, then running for the more substantial part of the feast, which she had been keeping warm in her brick oven.

A half-hour passed quickly in general conversation, then Mr. Merritt took a really affectionate adieu of the young man, and retired, leaving husband and wife alone. There was so little time left! A few minutes more and Lester must drive sharply to the station, to catch his train.

As he turned back to Beth, one of the swaying lanterns caught fire and flared up an instant, then the charred mass fell to the floor, and went out in darkness. Both watched it silently, till Palmerlee, with a decisive movement, stepped from one to another of the frail globes, extinguishing the candles in each; then, with a long, sighing breath, came to his wife, who stood outlined white and fair against the soft dusk.

He drew her to him in a silent ecstasy of love, longing, and despair. Was the night to come between them thus? There were no words, no tears, even, for such a parting as this. He could only strain her to him, then try to tear himself away, only to yield again and again to the compelling power of his mighty love. Finally, with a groan, he wrenched himself from her, and plunged blindly down to the drive, where in some way he

managed to unfasten the tired horse, and fling himself into the rusty old phaeton. Then with a cruel lash of the whip, he was off, not daring to think, or look, or feel, least he should play the poltroon; and as he dashed over the powdered shell road and clattered out of hearing, the young wife dropped to the step, cold and faint, to be gently supported by womanly arms, and to hear a woman's voice, seemingly at an immeasurable distance, murmur the words, "Señora — porrita — " before she slipped into momentary unconsciousness, worn out by the intense emotions of the day.

CHAPTER XIII.

SORROW.

BUT dreamless, restful sleep is the panacea of youth, and Beth, gently assisted to bed by Tessa after her brief swoon, rested till broad daylight, and awoke to sunlight, sweet odors, and bird-songs; awoke, also, to that feeling of utter strangeness which follows the first arousing to some new phase of existence. But she did not fully realize this change till Calvin respectfully laid two letters by her plate at breakfast, one addressed as usual to Miss Elizabeth O. Merritt, in Lala's writing, the other bearing the superscription, "Mrs. L. G. Palmerlee," in a round business hand, still unfamiliar. At sight of this a swift flush mounted to her forehead, while she murmured her acknowledgments to Calvin, and quickly thrust the enclosures out of sight in her pocket.

Her grandfather was bright and affable that morning, treating her with a respect and affection as new as it was delightful. His cough, he informed her, was much reduced, and his asthmatic seizure seemed quite subdued. When he recovered strength once more he should feel better than he had in years. How would she like a little trip

up the coast, later, — say to Santa Barbara and Monterey? It would doubtless seem lonely to her here for a time. And whenever she would enjoy a drive to Redondo Beach, Calvin could procure a carriage (or what passed for such in these wilds) and Tessa might accompany her.

“Thank you, Grandfather,” said Beth, in her meekest tone. “You are kind to think and plan for me; but I am quite happy here. Tessa is good company, and the sea even better. I have my books, writing, and work; I shall get on.”

She was glad to hide herself in the garden, and open her letters. Lester’s came first, and was hurried, but comprehensive. He had mailed it at Los Angeles in the early dawn, just before his departure for the east, and it reiterated his love, and hopes, and sorrow. Lala’s, of many pages, was filled with those precious bits of home news the absent so long for, most of them trivial in themselves, but big with interest to the reader. There was one saddening sentence, however, over which Beth lingered long. It was this: “Mother did not accompany us to the lake. She is not feeling very well, and does not go out even so much as formerly, and you know how little that was. Clit has it all her own way, now. Mamma Merritt does n’t even try to steal a march upon her in the kitchen, so, alas! there are no ginger-drops. I think the dear soul misses you. I found her sitting in the dusk last night, and when I stooped to kiss her cheek, my lips

were wet with a tear. I said, 'Why, Mother!' and she laughed. 'Was it salt, dear? It certainly was not bitter. I was thinking of our blessed Beth. She's a good child, Lala, as you are all good children, and as clear and clean as new crystal. She has been naughty, often, but she never deceived her mother in all her life, dear child!'"

When Beth first read this she gave a low, sharp cry, sprang to her feet, and walked back and forth swiftly, cut to the heart by the tender, confiding words.

"O Mother, Mother!" she moaned. "You shall know all this very day. Ah, no! it will be a week at least, wretch that I am! How could I keep it from her so long — my own sweet mother!"

But her heart failed at the task before her. "How can I explain it? How can I make her see it as I do? How will she take it? Will she ever forgive me?" were the torturing questions, while she resolutely went for her desk and pen. "I'll write here in the garden," she thought, "it's so still and peaceful. Heaven help me to word it so that it may not make her too shocked and sorrowful. I know she will like Lester when she sees him, but of course she will fear all sorts of things now — and what wonder?"

She made many beginnings, and was in danger of using up all her small store of stationery, such a quantity of these did she ruthlessly destroy. But at last she really made a start, and this accomplished,

she soon felt that her pen could not fly fast enough for all she had to tell. She went back to the beginning; she tried to explain how hard it had been to write at all of the young stranger, and to show how the intimacy, which to the home people must seem of mushroom growth, had really developed slowly, hour by hour, where each hour was as long as days in the busy east.

As she wrote on, filling page after page, a very fever of impatience possessed her to finish and send this letter. Her confidence was like one of those strange plants, native to African soil, which live years before they put forth the suspicion of a bud, then of a sudden bloom out into a riot of floescence bewildering to the senses, and often fatal to the plant. Now that she had begun to tell the story, she went into every detail, dissecting each thought and analyzing each emotion. It was not only a confidence; it was a judgment. One would shrink instinctively from such an outpouring, and shut the eyes, ashamed to peer into such hidden recesses of a human soul. Truly, Beth never could do anything by halves!

She wrote at intervals all day, scarcely stopping even to eat, and finished in the waning daylight, her eyes strained and smarting from their unaccustomed toil. Her paper was all gone now, and she observed with an amused laugh that the scattered sheets about her were sufficient to make a voluminous manuscript. "It looks like a story ready for the editor," she

thought; adding half aloud, "it is a story—my own story—and Mother is the terrible reader whose dictum I shall await with fear and trembling! It won't go into the waste-basket, though, I'm sure of that!"

She gathered the sheets together and paged them, till, unable to see another figure, she carried the thick pile into the house. She was intensely weary, and every bone had a separate ache, while there seemed a hot iron digging into her left shoulder-blade, but she had not felt so relieved and happy since she came from home. A weight was removed from her conscience, and she could have sung aloud for joy. The world had swung into place again, and she was upon its apex; the fog had lifted, and she could see to the furthest horizon, where all was blue and beautiful!

But it was impossible to send the letter until morning, and when morning came, another difficulty presented itself, one of those trivial checks which often seem like the sneers of an ironical fate,—there was no envelope in the house large enough to contain it. Two shadeless miles lay between the hacienda and the nearest village, and the day was one of blistering heat. Still, she would have attempted the walk, but that Calvin informed her he expected to go to the village toward night, and would do her errand for her. The delay was more than vexatious, but seemed necessary, so she tried to possess her soul in patience, and succeeded to a certain extent.

She spent a good share of the day on the beach, rambling aimlessly about, or sitting for long hours, motionless, in rapt contemplation of the sea, apparently. There was so much to think out, to readjust, and arrange; and her mind was as busy as her body was idle. Finally, perceiving the lowered sun, she turned toward home, to be met upon the veranda by Calvin, just about to start for the village, and was giving him directions how to enclose and address the packet, when a boy on a burro came around the curve of the drive, and seeing people outside, larruped his funny little beast into a mild lope. Beth turned, and both herself and Calvin watched him in silence as he drew rein sharply before the steps.

"Miss Merritt?" he asked, inquiringly, looking at Beth.

"Yes," she said, feeling herself grow cold as he fumbled in his pocket, and produced a yellow envelope.

"Telegram," he remarked with brevity, "paid. Sign, please."

Beth signed the book, then tore open the envelope with shaking fingers. It was doubtless from Lester, just to report progress, she thought, forgetting he would not have used her maiden name in addressing it, yet she was not accustomed to telegrams, and they always startled her. She opened it and read,

"Mrs. Merritt died suddenly last night. Come, if possible."
JAMES ADAMS, M. D.

Beth gave a hoarse shriek, and sprang straight into the air like a deer that is wounded to death, then broke into gasping cries which seemed forced from her by an agony too great for human endurance. The boy looked on, stupified. Calvin caught her by the arm, exclaiming, "For God's sake, Miss Merritt, *what* is it?" while her grandfather, who had come to the door, stared white and terror-stricken before such distress.

She had dropped the bit of paper, and he picked it up, uttering a cry himself as he read it, then turned to his granddaughter. "Elizabeth — my poor girl! Calvin, lead her inside. Her mother is dead. Call Tessa. Child, child, you'll kill yourself!" for Beth was clutching wildly at her white throat, like one smothering, and uttering such cries as were frightful to hear.

For a time, indeed, her wild grief was beyond all help or solace. The sudden blow seemed to her a quick and awful retribution for her criminal secrecy and deceit. It was not all grief that rent her asunder; it was partly the sense of heavy chastisement, deserved, indeed, but all the more torturing for that. Poor Beth! What might, in the more peaceful life of old, have come to her with soft footsteps of sorrow, blessed as the passing of a heavenly messenger, now sprang before her, terrible as the Avenging Angel with the flaming sword, and she wept with cowering mien, instead of with uplifted and hopeful eyes. At length her wild cries broke

into a moan, constantly repeated, "I must go home—let me go home!" and the only words that would arrest her attention were those in reference to her journey thence.

For once in his life Mr. Merritt forgot himself in solicitude for another. He seemed for the time a well man, and sent Calvin hither and yon, with a dispatch which taxed even his "excellent long legs," while Tessa, between soothing Beth, and packing her clothing, lost all her natural Indian stolidity in affectionate solicitude.

It was soon arranged by telegram that Beth was to join a Los Angeles family about to start for Chicago, whom the Merritts had met once or twice, while in that city, and both Mr. Merritt and Calvin accompanied her thither by the nearest train.

The family consisted of a gentleman named Lander, his wife and sister, also two children. They received Beth most kindly, but though quiet now, she was too shut away by her grief to realize, or care. Her impassive exterior covered a soul throbbing with remorse and penitence which had come too late, and bitter with denunciations against every person and circumstance which had hurried her into her present position. She left Tessa with silent aversion, because she had been so eager and helpful over the marriage; she took leave of her grandfather with coldness, because he had not thwarted the plan, and her feeling toward her absent young husband was a passionate hope that

she might never see or hear of him again! Her self-accusation was so great that she could hardly have lived through it could she not have thus distributed the blame, and by these feather-weights lightened her own intolerable load.

Of that journey she never remembered the details, — or only as one and another would sometimes flash into illuminated relief at odd moments during her after life, — it was one long, lagging horror. The ladies were sympathetic, the gentleman kindly solicitous, while the children, awe-stricken at her stony silence, left her severely alone; but she was indifferent to it all. Mrs. Lander expressed the feelings of the whole party, when she remarked, after they had seen her aboard her train for home, at the Chicago depot, "Oh, what a relief! I am sorry for the girl, but I have felt all the way as if we were travelling with a corpse! If she would only weep, or faint, or have hysterics, or do anything human and young, I could bear it, but that awful stoniness is too much! She looked as if she were literally frozen with horror."

Beth reached home late that afternoon, and through some mistake in the message sent from Chicago, was met by no one, as they were expecting her by a later train. She did not mind much. It was only a pin-prick in comparison with her constant soul-ache, and she stolidly entered a carriage and gave the house address. The driver stared at her a little. In this small city, an old family like the

Merritts was known to many by sight, as well as reputation, and he wondered if this could be that pretty girl who went to California awhile back.

"It's on account of the old lady's death, I suppose," he ruminated, noting the drawn, white face. "Gad! She takes it hard!" and he refrained from snatching the checks she handed him, as he shut her in.

They were soon before the well-known door, and as she alighted, Trix threw it wide, and flew down the steps, with a cry, "Beth, Beth! Is it you?"

Then they gathered about her, leading her in with tears, questions, and caresses, which she received still in that same horrible calm, till she reached the dear old library. There stood her mother's chair, with the worn places on the arms, and the hollow down the centre; here was her mother's basket, a bit of embroidery, neatly folded, on top, and the worn thimble lodged upon the scissors' points. Oh! could it be true? No, no! She was here still — and alive! She would come in presently through that dining-room door, with the little white zephyr shawl about her shoulders, and say, placidly, "My dear, have you come?"

Beth cast one questioning, imploring glance about upon the faces gazing at her so strangely, and she knew it was indeed too true! No mother could ever welcome her again; and, with a moan from the very depths of her aching heart, she broke into such tears as are like the torrents in Nature's paroxysms, —

terrible to witness, and desolating as they fall, yet sometimes restoring conditions which had been upon the verge of chaos and ruin.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT HOME.

THE most beneficent fact of life is its changes, though the acknowledgment of this may be wrung from us with groans. All joy would enervate, all sorrow would destroy. The rise and fall of these waves of circumstance purify the waters of existence, and prevent stagnation and disease.

Beth's grief, after this wild outbreak, took on a calmer phase, and as she listened to every detail of that last short illness no one had considered dangerous, and of the final passing away, still and peaceful as a tired child's falling asleep in protecting arms, it even gained a pale flavor of sweetness and resignation, more than she had ever hoped to feel.

"She woke after her two hours' sleep," Clit continued her narrative in subdued tones, with tears in voice and eyes, "gave a bright look around, and said, 'Are you all here?' Then her face shadowed a trifle, and she added, 'Yes, all but Beth!—I love you, my daughters,' she murmured, a little later, 'tell her so, too.' Then, after a time, she said, faintly, 'I'm tired now,'

and dropped off to sleep again. She never wakened."

"What time did she go?" whispered Beth.

"A little after midnight. Dr. Adams sent you the telegram about five in the morning."

"Thorne has been so good, Beth!" put in Lala, wiping her softened black eyes. "No son could have been kinder than he was to Mother all the time. He regretted not knowing in time to telegraph you, himself; was fearful the doctor would be too abrupt, and shock you unnecessarily."

"It was abrupt," murmured Beth, "but even Thorne could not have made it anything else."

"No, I suppose not," assented Clit, "but his thought was kind. He will be here presently; he was to go with Lala to the seven o'clock train for you — there! that's his step now."

Beth rose with a wild instinct of flight, but too late. Already he was at the door; the next instant he had clasped her hands in both his own, and was bending over her — but she could not see his face for tears. There was little said between them. An occasional remark in low tones fell from one and another, and it was agreed that Thorne should take Elinor and Beth, tomorrow, to visit the new-made grave, where the mother had lain for two days, now.

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Existence goes on in spite of death and heart-

break. Beth had soon sunk quietly into the old place at home, with the feeling of relief that the weary have when sinking upon a soft pillow at night, to much-longed-for rest. The long letter, never sent, lay in the depths of her trunk; the confession it contained lay still deeper in her heart, if not repudiated, at least set aside. How could she drag in the details of love and weddings where sorrow and sisterly tenderness made the atmosphere sacred? It was impossible! The whole thing was but a mirage of that lotus-land of California, dreamful, story-like, and strange. This cool, subdued, passionless, grief-shaded life was the real one; she had no part nor lot in the other.

So she went about her daily duties as if she were a little girl again, missing one gentle presence always, yet strangely comforted by the evidences of that presence all about her. In this she was different from Clit, who longed to put every dear reminder out of sight. Beth begged so hard to keep things as they were, and was so well seconded by Elinor and Lala, that the oldest sister finally yielded, even further consenting to let Beth take her mother's own room, a concession which made the girl almost happy. The move accomplished, weary Beth settled down with a feeling that here was her only safe resting-place. If her mother did but know all that was in her heart and forgive her! I am afraid, in those

days, Beth's prayers were oftener to her mother than her God; but perhaps a Christ who honored his own mother felt the penitence, and Himself forgave before she asked Him.

She had been at home less than a week, and was up in the owl's nest for the first time, dreaming away a sad, but serene, hour, when Trix called loudly from the bottom of the short attic stairway, "Beth, Beth! Come down. You're wanted." Then she heard light feet scurrying downwards in haste to the lower hall.

She rose slowly, and went languidly below, to find an excited group of girls gathered about Thorne in the doorway. He stood just within it, a black shape against the dazzling summer glow without, and she could not see his expression because of the blinding light. Elinor looked up, "Beth, it's always so—never one blow alone."

"No," put in Clit, "it's generally three. What will be our third, I wonder?" and Beth thought,

"'Are not Fate's lashes already numbered, then, for me?'"

But her inquiring glance at Thorne was half indifferent. It did not seem as if anything could deeply touch her now. Clit spoke again. "Thorn-ton has had a telegram for us from Calvin; Grandpa is dead! It was a choking spell, as he had always feared, but mercifully short."

Beth dropped into a chair, feeling faint and weak. What next, indeed! Was everything happening at

once? Thorne's voice aroused her, as he held a glass of water to her white lips. "Drink, Beth. Poor child, she is all unstrung! I will carry her to the lounge," and he did so, bearing her in his strong arms with as much apparent ease as when she was a little thing, and he, an overgrown lad, proud of his charge, yet delighting to tease and patronize her.

It was hard to wait for the explanatory letter the dispatch referred to as on the way, but they could do nothing till it came. It proved to be from the attending physician to Clit, and went into details of Mr. Merritt's last illness, saying he had begun to fail the day his granddaughter left, but no alarming change had occurred till a few hours before the end, when the lungs had ceased to work, and he had died of strangulation.

It seems, Calvin had long been instructed just what to do in case of this event; the body was to be taken east and buried beside the long-dead wife, and the will would then be read by the attorney of the deceased in presence of such relatives as should be assembled. Calvin had shown himself most devoted and capable, and would be met in Denver by a cousin of Mr. Merritt's. If any of the family desired to be present at the last rites in the eastern town, they could learn of the time agreed upon for the same by writing to Mr. Leonard Hoffman, the lawyer before-mentioned.

The letter was read aloud to the family by Clit. "Shall we go?" asked Trix, as she finished.

Beth made a quick, dissenting motion with her hand, and Clit said slowly, "I hardly know. If there was only a man among us to send, but ——"

"Oh, how can we?" murmured Lala, beginning to cry. "It will bring it all back again!"

There was silence for a few minutes, then Elinor asked softly, "Could we spare the money, girls?"

It was what all but Beth and Lala had been thinking, yet each one opened upon her surprised, almost reproachful, eyes. But she held her ground with gentle temerity. "It's a question we *must* consider, Clit, you know. We have n't Mother's life annuity any more, and it will make a difference of three hundred a year."

Clit sighed. "Yes, I know," she assented, reluctantly.

Lala looked frightened. "Will that leave anything?" she asked, disconsolately.

"Oh yes, a few hundreds," said Clit, quickly, "but little enough. I wonder if we ought to go? We could do no good, but it seems so disrespectful not to. How I *wish* we had a brother to send!"

"There is Thorne," suggested Trix.

Clit looked up eagerly for a second, then shook her head.

"I'm afraid he's too far removed. Perhaps the best way will be to write our condolences, and explain our own recent——Beth, would you write the letter?"

"No, no!" she answered sharply. "Let Nell; I could n't!"

Elinor looked up as if to protest, but after a glance into Beth's haggard face, said quietly, "Very well, though it must come from us all, of course," and so the matter was decided.

Though they had seemed to act for the best in this case, there were some self-reproaches among them, when, a few days later, they were notified by Leonard Hoffman that the deceased's will had been read, and after several legacies, notably a large one to his trusted valet, Calvin Jones, and an endowment of some amount to his Alma Mater in Virginia, he had left the bulk of his property to be divided equally among the children of his only son; except that his "beloved granddaughter, Elizabeth," was to have, in addition, all of his plate and furniture, his library, and two thousand dollars in bank-stock, "as a special expression of gratitude and esteem."

The property, when divided, would give each of them something like fifteen thousand apiece, but the executors, as well as Mr. Hoffman, himself, advised that a division be delayed so long as practicable, as certain loss must ensue from too great haste in the matter.

Clit was again the reader, and she looked up with a smile as she finished, to see a circle of astonished faces about her. "Beth, I congratulate you, especially," she said, kindly; "but, indeed, we are all to be envied, I think."

Beth looked up. "Oh, what made him?"

She was twisting her wedding circlet about her finger as she spoke, and Lala said, irrelevantly enough, it seemed, "When did you get that ring, Beth? You never used to wear it."

"It was — Grandma's," she finally uttered in a low voice, a quick flush tinging her cheeks.

"Did Grandpa give you that, too? How fond he was of you, Beth! Well, you're welcome to the little extras, sister mine, so don't look so guilty, child! What's the difference who owns all that handsome silver and stuff, so long as we have it here and use it together?"

"But did you expect this, Clit — our inheritance, I mean?" put in Trix, picking up the bit of sewing she had dropped while listening to the good news.

"Well, no. Of course we are the nearest of kin, but Mother never allowed us to expect a thing. She always said Grandpa was odd and erratic. He would leave his money exactly as he chose, and it was as apt to be to an institution, or to Calvin, as any one."

"I'm glad poor Calvin has that ten thousand," observed Beth; "patient creature, he deserves it!"

"So he does," said Elinor, her placid face taking on something of her mother's look as she spoke, "and I'm glad of Grandpa's will for two reasons: first, it will make money matters easy; second, it shows proper respect to our dear parents. If he once did object to the marriage, this condones it."

Beth reached out an impulsive hand to grasp the

one which lay upon the sofa's arm, and Elinor returned her sympathetic pressure heartily, as Clit remarked, "I almost wish, now, that some of us had gone to Greenville. Perhaps you and I, Beth, but—"

"At least we showed no over-anxiety!" cried independent Lala. "I do not know but it's as well, after all."

"We certainly had good reasons for staying at home," added Elinor, and Trix nodded a vigorous assent, her mouth being too full of pins to speak just then.

As there was no one to contest the will, it was soon probated, and no great time ensued before they were in receipt of a quarterly allowance which made housekeeping a joy for Clit, lightened Trix's toil upon the new mourning garments, and brought long-desired comforts and elegancies to them all.

Beth spent the days as she chose, now that an extra servant was engaged to assist Charity; and she chose to spend them between her own chamber, which she still loved to call "Mother's room," the owl's nest, and long walks into the country, when the days were not too sultry. Every hour pushed the California life further away, though she was always expecting some happening which should force her to tell that secret, now become as much a part of her as Christian's burden. But, strangely, nothing came. No letter from Calvin addressed to the new name, none from Mr. Hoffman mentioning what she

felt sure the former must have told him, and, stranger than all, no letter from Lester. She had answered his Los Angeles epistle at once, addressing as he bade her, but had heard no more in the brief interval before that distressful message summoned her home, nor had any letters been forwarded later. At first, overwhelmed as she was, she had only been glad of the reprieve ; now she was growing nervously expectant of some new happening.

It was nearly a month, now, since that ever-to-be-remembered day of her wedding, and he must have written again and again, and be wondering and wretched because he heard nothing in return.

"I am his wife," she meditated, as she walked slowly down a shady lane upon the outskirts of the town, one still, cool day, whose tempered sunshine had lost its midsummer ardor for a time, "I *am* his wife, though I can hardly believe it, and it's a relationship that must be acknowledged, unless I mean to play the hypocrite and deceiver all the time. If a letter should come that would give me an opening, I would be forced to tell."

Finally, she resolved to write to Calvin, asking if any letters had arrived after she left the hacienda, and offering him her sincere congratulations over his legacy. She did so, sending it to the care of Leonard Hoffman. To this she signed her new name, and gave her proper address in full, street and number added.

"The answer will force an explanation," she

thought wearily, "and then it will be over. Oh, mad girl that I was to be led into such an escapade! Did I love him, or not? He seems so unnecessary in this life, and the whole thing has made me so wretched, it seems now as if I never cared to see him again. And yet I thought I cared. It is an awful muddle, and I cannot imagine what the end will be!"

Several days later, the postman brought a letter bearing the eastern postmark she was looking for, but it was addressed to Miss Clarissa Merritt. It proved to be from Mr. Hoffman, and enclosed Beth's letter to Calvin, still unsealed. On a slip of paper, the lawyer had written, "I judge from the postmark this is from one of your family, and so return it to you. Calvin Jones left here as soon as he received his legacy, and has returned to Scotland, where he intends to become a farmer. I do not know his address. He left his regards for the Merritt family, and departed, a happy man."

There were a few items of business, then, and nothing more. Beth, who had half unconsciously watched every mail, was close by when Clit opened this, and when the latter observed, "Why, who has been writing to Calvin? It looks like your hand, Beth!" she reached for it, saying, with a coolness which surprised herself, "So it is. I wrote to congratulate him. He was kind to me, and devoted to Grandpa."

Receiving the enclosure, she tore it into shreds,

adding, as she sat fingering them, apparently in careless abstraction, but really in a tremor of nervousness, "I really liked Calvin, and I am glad he is so well fixed."

"Yes, so am I. He was a slave for years. Mr. Hoffman says the last of those boxes has been shipped, so we'll soon have everything in place. You must see Hyde about some more shelving for the library, at once, Beth; those books will be ruined lying about so."

The furniture, books, and plate had been arriving by instalments for some time, now, and already the pretty, old-fashioned house had assumed a new air of elegant plenty, which made it a charming home. "Yes, I will," answered Beth, and walked out, to shut herself into her room, and think, think!

"Calvin never said a word, that is certain," she ruminated, "for Mr. Hoffman distinctly referred to me as Miss Elizabeth, in speaking of the boxes. How strange that he did n't—and yet, I don't know. He never spoke unless distinctly addressed, and there was probably nothing to call up the matter. And now he is across the ocean, where we will probably never see or hear from him again." She fell into deeper musing here. "Lester must be in Chile, now, but where? I can't write till I know—and how can he let me know? The letters he sends to California will never reach me here. And when he comes back—does he even know the name of this town?"

She stopped and pondered. Had she given its name? She knew she had sometimes spoken of home, or said, "When I was back in Ohio," or "back east;" but had she mentioned the small city's name? She actually could not remember, and if she had not mentioned it — what then? Could he ever trace her? She was too little versed in such matters to know whether such a search would be easy or not, but she thought not. And in case he never found her? Why, she was *free*! She was Beth Merritt again, a girl at home, peaceful and at rest. Yet, not a girl, either; she must always remember that! Not a girl, but a vestal, to live apart and alone, occupying herself with her own work and aspirations, — pure, untroubled, serene.

It seemed, just then, an enviable lot, a kindly haven, to the storm-tossed girl. She rose from her long self-communing with the question on her lips, "Shall I tell them, and go through all the wondering, excitement, and questionings; or shall I leave it all to chance, and simply keep still and wait?"

As she stood near the centre of the room, thus weighing the future in the uncertain balances of her own will, her eyes fell on the dressing-table near by, and she noticed there a gold dollar, which dangled from a bracelet, thrown carelessly down amid a girlish jumble of laces and ribbons. It was one her father had given her upon her seventh birthday, and which she often wore. One side of

the dangling coin still kept the head of Liberty, but the other had been smoothed, and bore her monogram. A sudden silly impulse seized her. "Chance shall determine the question," she muttered, beginning to detach the tiny coin. "I have always called this my 'lucky piece.' I will toss up, and let this decide my fate. If the monogram comes uppermost, I will acknowledge my new name and position; if Liberty's head is on the top, I keep *my* liberty and girlhood, till something unmasks me. One — two — three — *go!*"

She flipped the piece nearly to the ceiling, and watched its glittering fall; then dropped to her knees, and bent over it. "It is decided," she said, with a long breath, as she rose. "Fate is on *my* side, for Liberty is uppermost!"

CHAPTER XV.

UNREST.

HARMONY is goodness, and disorder is sin — so, in substance, do the scientists teach us; and Elizabeth Merritt has been poorly presented if it is not apparent that her whole nature, originally tending to good, had been thrown out of harmony by hurrying events, and that there could be no peace, nor upward growth, while it remained unadjusted. To use a homely simile, she was like an express train which runs smoothly and with power and beauty so long as it keeps to its proper track, but if by one false move thrown from the rails, it bumps unevenly along, till, hissing and plunging, it reaches sure destruction.

Beth's first false step was her secrecy, as was her last; but the uncertain, half-shy withholding of the truth, those California days, was nothing to this deliberate course of deception she had entered upon now. When one reaches the point of gambling with Fate for the ordering of his life, he is far from the track of right, and almost ready for the final plunge into chaos.

Beth went downstairs more hardened by that resolution made over the gold coin than in all

her life before, and her sin now was as much greater than that of two months ago as premeditated theft for gain is greater than the snatching of a loaf through the irresistible impulse of starvation. It would seem as if her terrible remorse after her mother's death might have saved her from this, but a penitence that is thrown back on itself always causes dismay and desolation. Beth had been penitent toward her mother, not toward her God, and if she could have poured it all into that mother's arms, her softened spirit might have looked for higher pardon, but, as it was, the flood, when it receded, only left her soul more barren than before. She had saved nothing but a dread and hatred of her western experience, which but incited her to seize upon any resource which promised to shut it out of her life forever.

She had deliberately chosen the way of deceit, and a lowering of all her standards was as certain as the laws of gravitation. But she did not look upon the matter in this way. True, she must acknowledge one plague-spot, but why need it spread? She could cover it with a patch, and keep the rest of her personality spotlessly clean, and perhaps no one would discover the blemish but herself. Poor, foolish Beth! So she made excellent resolutions for the spending of her time and money. She had been an irregular churchgoer, too often only swayed thitherward by a consciousness of new and becoming costumes;

now she would attend regularly, with no thought of her apparel. She had helped the poor in a haphazard way, when stirred by some harrowing tale of distress; she would now make district visiting a daily penance. In a word, she had gambled with Fate; she was now trying to bargain with Providence! Let her have her own way in one thing, she would follow His ways in all others; let her keep the pet sin of her soul, and all else should be pure righteousness; being a Publican in one respect, she would be a Pharisee in the many—this Jew of an Elizabeth.

So she burned the letter of confession, and would have burned her marriage certificate, could she have found it, thus hoping to erase all evidence against her, but the latter she could not find. In some way it must have been overlooked in that hurried packing of Tessa's, as had been several articles of lesser note; but she hoped it was safely destroyed, wherever it might be.

She had thus settled things to her mind, and should have been feeling light and care-free, if such settlements always brought happiness, when, one brilliant day, Mrs. Godfrey's maid brought a message to the following effect:—

"MY DEAR BETH,—

You have scarcely been here since your return, and I long to see you. Can you not dine with us tonight? Say yes, and I'll keep it as a *bonne bouche* for Thorne.

Ever yours,

HELEN M. GODFREY."

There was no good reason why Beth should not accept, and she did. These invitations were quite frequent in the old days, but Mrs. Godfrey was right in saying Beth had scarcely been in the house since her return, for the girl's mind had been too full of other things for even such family visiting, and her deep mourning was always an excuse. But she often grew tired of her own company, of late, and though she had been wont to make game of Mrs. Godfrey in the past, she still liked her fairly well in a superficial way.

So she tucked a bit of work into her bag, and started out in the late afternoon. As she passed out of the grounds, she let her eyes roam, lingeringly, over the improvements, for they had already smartened up the place considerably. The veranda had been widened, and an ornamental railing added, while a turret-like projection at one corner gave larger space for Grandpa Merritt's books off the library proper, and added a smart, villa-like look to the outside. All had been freshly painted, and the lawn, with its trim flower-beds, showed a gardener's care. What it had lost in picturesqueness it had gained in freshness and comfort, and Beth thought, contentedly, "What a dear old place it is! And Clit makes a capital manager. It is well we each have our special occupations and tastes, so that our desires do not greatly conflict, for we are a rather self-willed set, take us all around."

Just here she stopped to speak to a young man, who was about turning in from the street.

"Ah, Dr. Hunter, good-afternoon. I see you are headed for our house. Shall I turn back with you?"

"No, indeed, Miss Merritt. Don't let me detain you; I see you are going out."

"Yes, I have an engagement, but you will find some of us inside, and I think Trix is lounging precious time away in the hammock under the maple on the side lawn."

"Thank you. I will doubtless find some one that will do, though the group is scarcely complete without you."

As he smiled, she noted his fine eyes and the white teeth gleaming under his mustache. He was a bright, pleasant-faced fellow, and evidently a social one, for, though a new-comer in town, he had already made several calls upon the Misses Merritt. She watched him a minute, and gave a nod and smile to herself as he passed directly around the house toward the maple. "I thought so! It is Trix he singles out, though he is too gentlemanly to make it seem pronounced, yet. Well, he seems a good fellow. God grant her story may be a happier one than mine!"

Her face clouded over, taking on a look almost stern with lines of introspection, and noticing no one she met, she hastened along, her face too thin a mask to hide the turmoil within.

"Well, I declare!" muttered one girl to her companion, as Beth obviously passed them by. "The airs that girl assumes since she came into her property are simply absurd! The time is not so distant when she was very glad to be polite to me. The idea of anybody's pretending to charity, and all that, when she's too uppish to notice her own neighbors."

"I don't think she saw us," replied the more generous spirit at her side; "she looked to me as if troubled, or thinking deeply."

"Troubled! What has she to trouble her, I'd like to know? I tell you, it's pride. So is her alms-giving and church-going; every bit of it pride! She likes to have people say she is generous with her means. Pshaw! I can see through her without half trying. She's getting to be a downright hypocrite, and for my part, I don't like her half as well as I used, when she made no pretensions."

The other did not reply. One must be more than humanly generous to persist in defending a person in whom one feels no interest, and, besides, how did she know but that Cornelia Adams was right? Her father was the Merritt's family physician, so she ought to know.

Meanwhile, Beth had gone on, thinking her sin and her troubles could affect no one but herself; ignoring in her girlish unwisdom that divine law of influence which works as silently and ceaselessly as every other force of Nature.

Mrs. Godfrey greeted her with more animation than usual. She was seated upon the broad front veranda (in this town, which was hardly more than an overgrown village, the inhabitants made much of these outer reception rooms) and rose with languid grace to kiss her visitor, before motioning her to a pretty cane chair with yellow plush cushions.

"It's so pleasant out here these warm afternoons," she observed. "Will you take off your hat now, or wait till we go in?"

"There is no hurry about it," said Beth, trying to smile and be herself.

"I'm reading a book that has left me fairly unstrung," proceeded Mrs. Godfrey in her dulcet voice. "It is called 'An Utter Failure,' and is the sad, disappointed life of a noble, self-sacrificing woman, who was never appreciated till after her death. I've really been weeping over it," giving an affected little dab at her exceedingly dry eyes with a fine bit of embroidery. "I don't like sad books, do you? One finds real grief enough in this life without imagining it. Books should make us laugh, rather than weep."

"The saddest thing I know is a book that means to be all funny!" remarked Beth, with asperity.

"Why, really, my dear," drawled the lady, opening her pale blue eyes, "I did not know you could be so satirical. I should have thought, now, you were all for fun; but, to be sure, that was before —"

"Yes," interrupted Beth hastily, "that was when I was a girl — a child. It seems years, but it is only months, to be sure. You will be surprised if I say that the only books I like at all, now, are those I once abhorred, — biographies. I devour every one that comes in my way."

"How singular! Why, pray?"

"I can hardly tell, only I want to study people's lives exactly as they are; stories are too imaginary. But do you suppose any biography, or even autobiography, is literally true?"

"Why should n't it be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Can any one lay bare everything in his life? I think Benjamin Franklin almost brutally honest in some things he tells of himself, but don't you believe even he glossed them over? It is so natural to put one's best side out, always."

Mrs. Godfrey gently fanned herself a few times before she answered.

"Perhaps so; I never thought. I imagine we all have a locked cell, like Bluebeard himself, and it's as well, too. Such revelations as those of Marie Bashkirtseff can do no good, and only make you recoil from her."

"But she was honest," mused Beth, "and no hypocrite. She told it all, good, bad, and indifferent. Can anything be worse than pretending to be what you are not?"

Beth's voice took a scornful ring as she asked the question.

"But do you make no difference between downright hypocrisy and a simple withholding of the truth?" asked Mrs. Godfrey, surprisedly. "Surely, we are not obliged to tell everything."

"Are n't we? And if so, who is to decide what shall, or shall not be told? Is not every event in our lives, then, a matter of our own affair alone, so long as we choose to keep it so?"

Beth had unconsciously leaned forward, and was gazing with pale intensity into the face of her hostess. The conversation had seemed to grow out of nothing, but it had now reached a stage where it was filled with vital interest for her.

Mrs. Godfrey looked at her with a vague astonishment. Beth was not apt to be so eager over abstruse argument in the old days; she was, indeed, ceasing to be a child. The thought even crossed her mind, "If I did not know better, I should think she had a personal interest in this matter; but Beth never had a secret in her life." She answered slowly, "That decision must naturally be left to the only one who knows, — one's self, must n't it?"

Beth gave her head an impatient movement, sat upright, and laughed curtly.

"What unprofitable discourse! Of course every man — and woman — must be a law unto himself in

these matters. Is that Thorne coming up the street?"

It was Thorne, and, as he caught sight of the guest, a smile flashed over his fine face. "Beth!" he cried, springing up the steps. "Why, this is delightful. This is like old times. You are going to take off your hat and stay, are n't you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, Thorne, I sent for her to dine with us. You've looked a little worn lately, and I thought it might hearten you up."

"That was kind, Mother," turning to give her a smile while retaining Beth's hand. "Let me take your hat in, please. It's too heavy and—and dark for you."

She obediently removed the *crépe*-enshrouded head-gear, stopping to pin the veil over it as neatly as would Clit herself, before yielding it into his hands. He looked up with a smile in his eyes. "You are growing old, Beth—old and careful! I can remember when you used to hang your hats on the floor oftener than elsewhere."

She laughed. "Yes, I have aged rapidly, Thorne; still, I was always precise in some ways. Don't you remember those half-dozen new Christmas handkerchiefs Clit was so distressed over, because I snipped a tiny hole directly in the centre of each, so as to be able to pick them up by the exact middle when I carried them?"

Both of them laughed out with a merrier note than for some time at the funny little circumstance,

and the girl resumed her chair with a warm home-feeling of intimacy and approval. "Ah!" she thought, inwardly, "what friend can be like an old friend, who knows you as you are, and always have been, aside from outward circumstance?" and she sighed with a sensation of pleasure and relief.

The visit was all delightful. After the dainty, well-served little dinner, the two wandered about the small garden, Mrs. Godfrey, too fearful of dampness to leave the sheltering piazza roof, calling to them at intervals what to notice especially, as they wandered to and fro, dutifully stopping when she bade them, though neither paid much attention to the new varieties of plants and blooms she was so proud of. Once she might have noticed, and rebuked them sharply, but she was her most genial self tonight. Since the acquisition of their little fortunes, the Merritt girls had gained new dignity in her eyes, and Beth had always been her favorite, except when some specially overt act of the impulsive girl sent her to Coventry for a time. As for Thorne, he was for the moment the same old boyish friend Beth had always liked and relied upon, and the whole impression left upon her by the visit was that of blissful peace and rest.

A few mornings later, as the sisters lingered over their pleasant breakfast table, Lala suddenly observed, apropos of nothing, "O Clit, did you know the old Hawkins place was sold to somebody in the east? He is going to move here, and fit it all up.

They say he's a widower with one child, a little girl whom he fairly dotes on, and his aunt keeps house for them. Sally Hawkins told Gene Wisner, and he told Hattie Cole, and she told me," proceeding to swallow her last spoonful of coffee, and surreptitiously scrape up the sugar in the bottom of the cup, before Clit should interfere.

"I'm glad you have the succession correct, Lala," observed Beth, ironically.

Lala replied with a *moue*. "I won't be beholden for other people's yarns," she observed, going over to the broad window, where she proceeded to coax Cherry, the canary, to her forefinger and a breakfast of sweetened cracker from her own red lips. "'I tells it foh jes' wot it am wuth!' as Charity so often observes. But I really do believe this is so, for there is a man drawing a load of stone this minute!"

All trooped over to the window to note this important fact, even Beth condescending to a languid interest.

"It will be pleasant to have people in there whom we can neighbor with," remarked Trix.

"What was the matter with the Hawkins's?" asked Beth, sharply.

Elinor glanced up at her with mildly surprised eyes. "Why, nothing, dear, only Mrs. Hawkins never goes out, you know, and the girls are younger than we. Don't you feel well this morning, Beth?"

The latter flushed. "Yes, I feel well enough. I

am cross, Nell, I own it!" stepping over to give Nell's sunny head a conciliatory pat.

"Yes, Beth, I've noticed it," remarked Clit, in a matter-of-fact tone, as she examined the napkins to see if they needed changing. "You are much sharper of late; I hope it is n't indigestion. Rusha," — to the new waitress, — "I noticed a speck on the urn, this morning, that looks like rust; see to it at once, please, and to the other large silver pieces as well. The smaller silver you may leave till to-morrow."

Beth silently left the room, and soon the door of the owl's nest clapped to behind her, its spring-lock snapping into place with a sharp click. Its occupant gave a dreary look about her, then walked to a shabby old desk by a pointed window in one of the two gables which were cut steeply through the sloping-attic roof, and seated herself before it, leaning her head on her two hands. The windows faced the east, and the morning sun shone brightly between the branches of the maple, outside, flecking the bare floor within, and playing merrily over her bowed head. One or two decrepit chairs, which promised ease, perhaps, but wore little grace, were placed about; a small wooden chest, whose lid was closed, filled one corner; a small set of shelves, loaded with homely, well-thumbed books, hung over a table in another; while a shabby lounge, with two or three soft-looking pillows, crossed a third. This owl's nest might not be very fine or well-feathered, but it

had a look of comfort, and seemed as if it might give adequate shelter in a storm. That it could do so Beth had often proven in the sometimes squally past, but this morning a sense of heaviness permeated all her atmosphere, and made even her snug retreat seem cold and unwholesome.

After sitting motionless for awhile, she gave a long, sobbing sigh, then rose and crossed the room to the chest, and opening it, disclosed an interior half-filled with clippings from papers, unused stationery, and stacks of written manuscripts. Pawing the disorderly mass over impatiently, she finally pulled out a thick, square envelope, and drew from it several closely written sheets. The first was headed "A Last Look," and the last was signed "Browne Livermore." The writing, bold, rapid, and angular, was Beth's own. The envelope from which she had taken the manuscript was addressed to Browne Livermore, Esq., and the name of a well-known publication was printed in its upper left-hand corner. A form of rejection from the editor had fluttered to the floor; evidently Beth had been venturing into the green pastures of story-land, only to be gently ejected and the bars put up against her, as if she had been some well-disposed, but blundering, donkey. Even the lion's skin of her masculine disguise had not made her entrance secure, and she had been brooding over the fact ever since last night, when she had pettishly tossed the manuscripts into the chest, saying angrily, "It's no use!" but adding

an instant later, through set teeth, "I won't give up! Sometime, it shall be the other way; they shall ask, and I shall decide!"

But the boastful, never-say-die spirit that had kept her up then was gone now, and despondency held full sway. It was bitter to see her little barques, so hopefully launched, come floating back in search of anchorage ground; but bitterer still to see her efforts to be what she should throw in her teeth as useless, and unappreciated.

"If I could be a success in *anything*!" she muttered with bitterness. "I can't be good and they won't even let me be famous!" Then she had to smile at her own presumption. "Possibly they would n't object if the genius was in me. Oh, what a wretched fraud I am!"

As if she could no longer bear herself, she turned and leaned far out of the window, but drew back hastily as she heard the grinding of horses' hoofs upon the gravelled drive in front, and the loud "Whoa!" of a man who would check a spirited team. Cautiously craning her neck among the sheltering, maple boughs, she could catch a glimpse of two beautiful equine heads projecting just beyond the angle of the house, which hid carriage and driver from her view. Soon laughter and talking floated up to her, and presently there was a toss of the spirited heads, and the steeds sprang forward, bringing quickly into view a natty buggy, in which sat Dr. Hunter and Trix.

"He is going to take her for a drive," thought Beth, secure behind the maple. "How he bends toward her and smiles! Really, quite lover-like!" and a sharp twinge caught her, for some reason.

She turned abruptly away, snatched up the manuscript and readdressed it, with compressed lips and gloomy eyes, then, dropping it into a satin bag, she went down to her chamber, from which she soon emerged in street dress.

"Going out, Beth?" called Elinor from her pansy-bed, pushing back her large hat as she rose and looked around.

"Yes, a little while. By the way, have you any errands, or Clit?"

"Trix promised to see to them. She has just gone with Dr. Hunter on his rounds. He said it was such a charming morning it seemed too bad not to take some one with him." Elinor had been advancing slowly, and removing her old gloves as she spoke, and now was opposite her sister. "Do you like him, Beth?" she asked in a lower tone.

"I scarcely know him, yet. I've been out, or busy, nearly every time he has called, you know."

"Yes," looking up quickly, "I have noticed. Is it only on account of our mourning, Beth? You used to be so fond of company, dear."

"I should think that reason enough, Nell."

"But would Mother have wanted us to be solitary, Beth? She never believed in nursing grief, and

I'm sure she would wish us to be cheerful, and keep up an interest in the lives about us."

"Don't I, Nell? I spend two days of every week visiting the poor — and the rich don't need me."

"How do you know that, Beth? And besides, is n't your visiting a bit — mechanical? Do those things do much good unless our heart is in them?"

She tried to smile down the frown she saw gathering blackly upon Beth's brow, but failed. To the younger girl's smarting senses this seemed the last and cruellest cut of all. She could not speak, but pushing by the already repentant Elinor, she muttered something indistinguishable, and hurried down the walk at a pace which showed both haste and temper, leaving poor, gentle Nell to gaze after her through misty eyes.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW NEIGHBORS.

BUT one must be sadly out of tune, indeed, to resist the influences of a summer morning washed to crystal clearness and coolness by an electrical storm in the night, and Beth was forgetting everything but the sense of youth and health by the time she had mailed her article, and was swinging blithely down the street for home. She had taken a lock-box in the post-office that she might keep her affairs more entirely to herself, for she fully believed in the old maxim, "Tell the world of your successes, but never of your failures," and alas! her literary ventures were mostly failures in these days.

As she neared home, the inextinguishable hope of youth reviving in her veins, her attention was arrested by the appearance of the Hawkins's dwelling, whose large yard joined their own. The house, old and well set back from the street, was scarcely in keeping with the fine grounds, half neglected as they were, and Beth noticed with interest the goodly heap of foundation stones freshly dumped at one side, and the quantity of long timbers just being unloaded by two men. Then, too, the family were evidently moving out, for the curtainless windows

were set wide open, and rolls of carpets and miscellaneous furniture choked up the small portico; Lala's information, if roundabout, was at least correct, so far.

"I hope they will put up a handsome house, and that the new-comers will be companionable people," she thought, then checked herself gravely. "What can it matter to me? I am shut out from the world!" and the shadow fell over her bonny face once more.

But all the girls thought it great fun to watch the building of the new house, which was pushed on with a rapidity rather unusual in the somewhat sleepy town. They speculated a good deal over it, noting with triumph or dejection, according to the stand they had been maintaining, as the wide opening in front proved to be an art window, instead of the double front doors some of the family would insist upon; while all had to give up beaten when the odd octagonal projection to the north developed into a reception-hall, instead of the library they had felt certain of.

The new owner had not come on yet, but intrusted the building to a young architect he had sent from the east, — a trust some thought misplaced, until the merry, boyish individual, who at first seemed far too young for such a responsibility, developed so thorough an understanding of his business as to cause the native builders to open their astonished eyes. This young man was soon upon speaking terms with our young ladies, for he proved to be an extremely social

person, and had a way of walking straight into people's hearts before they had time to close the doors against him. Plain almost to ugliness, yet his laugh was so merry, his clasp so cordial, his heart so light, and his face so intelligent, that you had scarcely given this verdict before you wished to recall it, and accord him the good looks he only possessed because of the good feelings of which they were the reflection.

All the Merritts liked him,—everybody liked him,—and he soon grew into a fashion of dropping over at odd minutes, to ask their opinion about this or that improvement, with a manner that was almost brotherly. If no one else could go, Lala was always ready, and it became quite a family joke to inquire about the progress of the house she and Dick Hewson were building.

Yes, it was Dick Hewson, every one called him so. He was one of those men who are never *mistered*. The whole town spoke of him as "that boy," and had dubbed him "Dick" before he had been there a week. Though he spent a great deal of spare time teasing Lala, who was his counterpart in animal spirits, he developed an almost reverential admiration for Elinor, whom he usually spoke of as "that sweet saint."

"There they go again!" laughed Trix, one day, turning from the window to Clit and Beth, who were hemming napkins near by. "It's Nell he has in tow this time, and I presume she has got to decide where

he shall put the dumb waiter. He always lets her give the final decision, I notice, though he graciously allows us to express an opinion, which he acts upon, or not, as he chooses. How much older is she than Dick Hewson, Clit?"

"Oh, a year or two, perhaps."

"Is that all? Well, she seems six years at least—that is, in actions. What a boy he is!"

"Yes, but an unusually fine architect," put in Beth. "Even our pompous old Brinkerhoff, here, who boasts of planning every public building in the county, is fairly dumb with astonishment. Thorne was laughing over it the other night. He likes Dick."

"Really, girls, that *is* too familiar!" began Clit, who had spasms of primness when the young man was out of sight, but always forgot them upon his reappearance, and Trix laughed.

"Oh, I know it; it's scandalous. But I can't help it. Nobody would know who was meant if you said *Mr.* Hewson; he keeps his name as a lord does,—by right of superiority. Who would dare place him among all the common herd of 'misters'?"

Clit could not but assent, while Beth laughed appreciatively. She was growing lighter of heart these days. Home was so pleasant, and old friends so kind. As their mourning gave place to human interests once more, she found that the days passed on wings. So many pretty girls, independently

situated, could not fail to attract the best society of the place, and an evening seldom passed without its droppers-in, who came to sing, to talk, to sit in the moonlight, uninvited, yet always welcome. Thorne was a constant visitor, and his presence always rested her. She was too apt to view her own character through the eyes of others; she shrank from turning upon it the search-light of her own absolute knowledge; and because so wise and true a friend as Thornton Lewis thought her worthy of confidence and trust, she told herself she *was* worthy. And she kept resolutely closed a certain window of her soul, which might have given a peep into quarters not intended for inspection.

When Elinor returned from the new building, the young architect was with her. He came in breezily, with a, "Hello, girls! You ought to see our last little neat device. It's a corner in the dining-room between the fireplace and the window, and seemed too narrow for any use whatever; but trust us! We've planned out the dearest little cup cupboard you ever saw — well, you need n't laugh; if I had said cupboard alone you would not have understood, so far has the word travelled from its original meaning — but this is really a *cup-board* for the display of fine china cups. We're going to have them hung from tiny brass hooks, and protected by glass; aren't we, Miss Nell? And below, there's to be a velvet-lined

cabinet for the dessert service—oh, it's fine!"

While speaking, he had flung himself easily into a broad rocker, and tossed his soft felt hat under the nearest table. A shaving or two still clung to his clothing, his boots bore undeniable marks of fresh mortar, and his trousers were turned up an inch at the ankle, but he did not know it. He saw only the pretty room and its fair occupants, felt only the cheer and comfort of their smiling presences, and his homely face grew radiant, while witty, epigrammatic remarks were shot at each with a precision and elegance which proved that, if the body was unkempt, the brain was not. Even Clit soon forgot the mortar and shavings, and warmed to him, until she surprised herself and all the rest by inviting him to remain and lunch with them.

"What, I? This way?" giving himself one flashing, critical glance, and frankly turning down the hems about his spotted boots. "How I'd love to! Do you mean it, or is it just your heavenly civility?"

"I mean it," she laughed, "we all mean it, if you will take us as you find us."

"Couldn't take you better, for I always find you perfection. But where is the baby? I miss her sprightly tongue."

This was his usual designation for Lala, who, of course, hugely resented it. He often spoke of Clit as the "Lady Manageress," while Trix was "Dolly

Varden," and Beth, "The Odd One" — all in capitals, he insisted. We already know his distinguishing title for Elinor.

"Gone to her violin lesson, but she 'll be here," answered Trix. "But, Dick, I do believe you had better go and furbish up a bit, hadn't you? I don't mean to be critical, but frankly, you do look——"

"Beastly? I don't doubt it; I always do. But there are degrees even in beastliness, as Beauty no doubt discovered before she married the disguised prince."

"Why, Trix!" cried Clarissa, flushing with astonished mortification, "how could you?"

"Because I would! Somebody might come in, and I have sufficient regard for our friend to wish him to make a good impression. I'm sure he appreciates my motherly solicitude."

"Appreciate it? I am bowed to the earth with gratitude! But what completely subjugates my spirit is the inner conviction that you haven't a blacking-brush in this house."

"Oh, yes, our gardener keeps one in the woodshed," cried Clit, in relieved tones. "I'll have Rusha get it for you."

"Do, please; and then, if you'll send Germany after a hair-brush, and let Bavaria hunt up a whisk-broom, and ask Poland to lend me her manicure set, I'll soon be presentable."

A merry laugh from the doorway ushered in

"the baby," swinging her violin in its case, while her broad hat shaded cheeks like damask roses. He turned and looked her over. "Well, you are a beauty!" he said, with as cool and honest an admiration as he would have accorded a Persian cat in a prize show. "I declare, when you laugh and display those teeth and dimples, and your great eyes flash, you'd thrill a turnip! I have seen you when you were not so charming, though. Oh, thanks! the blacking. I'll retire for a brief space, and reappear—an Adonis."

He bowed himself out with a flourish, leaving Lala to digest his somewhat ambiguous compliment at her leisure, while Trix remarked, "There is a man who would walk up to Queen Victoria and tell her she had a smudge across her nose with as much coolness as if it were Rusha. He is the most impudent, and yet the most—"

"Delightful fellow you ever saw. Thank you!" finished a voice in the doorway, and Dick re-entered, as much touched up as so careless a specimen could well be.

Trix shook a dainty white fist at him amid the merriment, then immediately accepted his offered arm to the dining-room. There, after a few moments' discussion of sweetbreads and salad, he announced calmly, "My boss is coming next week."

"Who? I supposed you were great Caesar, and owned no greater!" observed Beth, nibbling at a salted almond.

"You mistake me; I am modest. My boss is the man who buys my time, talent, and tribulations — in a word, the owner of the new house, Mr. Gresham."

"Oh, is he coming?" cried Lala. "I'm so glad."

"And wherefore, *mon enfant*? He is no playmate for you, this widower with a daughter of his own. Ah! I bethink me; it is the child you are longing for. You can dress dolls together, and——"

"I do declare, Dick Hewson, you are horrid. If I'm young, you are worse! Everybody calls you a boy."

"Certainly; so I long to keep you young with me, fair rosebud! Miss Clit, does your last etiquette-book say a person may ask for a second helping of sweetbreads, if he is a boy and ravenous?"

"I think it does," laughed Clit, "provided the sweetbreads hold out; and these seem to."

It was impossible to show resentment against a creature who did not know the meaning of the word, so Lala was soon asking questions again about the coming widower, all of which the youth answered with categorical exactness, putting in an occasional remark of his own. "He is thirty-two years, three months and eighteen days of age, to the best of my knowledge and belief, and his hair is not red; rather a mild olive in tint. No, he does not dye it, nor his whiskers, because he has none. I regret to say he has a mustache. His mustache is a shade lighter

than his hair ; I should call it gas-light green. Yes, he smokes with moderation, sleeps at night, and eats when he can find anything to satisfy his pangs. He has pangs, I believe, though I never asked him. He has been a widower two years, and there is no record to show that he was not fond of her. Yes, he talks. Too much? Not when with me. No, he never swears. He is tall. He is not thin. He is nice, and also richer than is quite proper. It is supposed that he would like to marry again. For further biographical details, let me refer you to the family archives."

"And now you've finished, we have n't the first idea what he is like!" laughed Elinor.

He turned to meet her pleasant smile, and said, in an altogether different tone, "Well, I will try to tell you, Miss Nell. He is a good fellow, and a gentleman, but enjoys retirement, and is a bit of a student. He does sometimes go into society, but in a cautious way, for he appreciates its dangers! He is just a little fastidious and haughty, though kindly-natured at bottom, and can, when he likes, be the most interesting talker you ever listened to."

"And how is the child?" asked Beth.

"A quaint little thing, older than her father in many ways, and charmingly babylike in others. She has her mother's rare type of beauty,—deep violet eyes with black lashes and brows, and hair of the palest gold. Her father worships her, and her name is Gladys."

"She must be a little fairy. I'm sure we shall like them!" was Trix's emphatic comment.

"But the question is, Will they like us?" added Beth, promptly.

"That is a matter of course," responded the historian, "but beware of the aunt!" and as he brought this out with awful emphasis, he rose and began fishing for his hat.

"Why, what do you mean?" came in full chorus, but he was under the table-cover, and when he emerged with the head-cover it was only to give it a deprecatory wave as he exclaimed, "Dear ladies, I must away, for Duty calls! It has been an oasis in a desert of — plaster. Thanks and adieu!" and had left the house, crossed the lawn, and leaped the low hedge separating the two places before the girls fairly realized his exit.

CHAPTER XVII.

DISTURBANCES.

“**W**HERE is Trix?” asked Beth, poking her head, crowned by its black hat, into the library one afternoon.

Clit looked up absently from her newspaper. “I don’t know — oh, yes! She went out to make a call or two, I believe.”

“Humph!” grunted Beth, entering completely, and closing the door behind her, “then it was she I saw with Dr. Hunter down by the old mill. They were pacing along, slow and lover-like as possible, and —”

“But is there anything criminal in that?” asked Elinor, looking up from her sewing, while Lala added, as she rose from the piano, “Why, Beth, you’re a perfect old maid, and man-hater, I do believe! It’s bad enough for you to be so offish yourself, and refuse to go everywhere, without sitting down upon the rest of us so, I should think! If Trix likes to go with Dr. Hunter, and he likes to have her, why should n’t they be strolling together on a nice afternoon, I wonder? ‘There’s no law agin it, as I knows on,’ to quote our respected gardener.”

"Perhaps not," said Beth, ignoring the first half of the sentence, "only, what do we know of Dr. Hunter? He has been here so short a time, and he never talks about himself at all."

"That's one thing I like about him," remarked Clit, "most young men talk about themselves all the time. He is a refreshing exception."

"He is pleasant enough, I'll admit; but it is evident Trix is growing fond of him, and it—scares me!"

"Well, it does n't *me*!" cried Lala, with emphasis. "It enchants me! I think it's about time we had beaux, and I tell you what, if you think you're going to keep me a little girl till you've all taken as much time as you like to pick and choose, you're mistaken. I'm 'most seventeen, and nearly through school. Why, dear me! Emma Jones was married at my age."

"And you doubtless long for a like fate!" commented Beth, with a curl of her lip.

"Well, no, I don't care to marry a drunkard, perhaps, but that isn't always necessary, is it? What I do object to is that the whole family should live and die old maids, like those Thurlowe sisters. When I think of the long, lank, skinny, gossipy tribe, it gives me the horrors!"

"Well, you need n't fear—" began Beth, and checked herself, actually paling with fright at the admission she had been nearly betrayed into.

"Yes, I need fear, too, if you're all going to be so

pokey!" cried Lala, now thoroughly wrought up. "The girls at school call us the 'Old-maid Merritts' now, and it makes me furious! I hope to goodness Trix will marry before winter and redeem us, I do! If just one of us would be a Mrs. I wouldn't care, but I'll elope myself if some of you don't—I give you fair warning!" and Lala stalked off, red and indignant.

Beth looked after her strangely. How much did the girl mean of this pettish outburst? Was it really a mortification and annoyance to her that the five were all supposed to be husbandless, and if so, what—she stopped there, hardly daring to think further, but by tacit consent the subject seemed to have dropped, and Clit hastened to say, "I've just been reading about these Chile disturbances. It begins to look as if our country would become involved. We've sent down another war-ship, and ordered all those on the spot to remain longer, though the rebellious party down there are triumphant, and the war practically over. The dispatches say the battle of last week was an overwhelming defeat for the Governmental party, and that Balmaceda's army is routed, and he a fugitive, while the whole country is under mob law."

Beth listened with bated breath. Though Clit took a daily paper, and read it religiously, she herself seldom looked at one, and her desire had been to see nothing relating to the civil strife in Chile. Her notion was a childish one,—that if, like the

ostrich, she kept her own eyes covered, there would be nothing to see,—and her policy of an entire ignoring of the subject seemed to have worked well so far. This was the first chance word which had occurred to bring before her that spot upon the world's map once scarcely noticed by her, but now secretly of deepest importance, and her heart beat heavily with a certain sense of remorseful shame which almost amounted to self-loathing, as she listened.

Lester was in danger, possibly engaged in actual fighting, and she, safe at home, was doing her best to forget, to ignore him. Was she not, in intention, at least, akin to a murderess? She caught up the gloves she had lain down, and almost ran from the room.

Clit, again immersed in the news column, failed to notice, but Elinor's soft eyes followed her with motherly solicitude. Elinor was more like the lost mother than any of the others, both in person and disposition, and her expression now was so exactly that of the sainted woman, it might have been a reflection from her heavenly eyes. "Clit," she said softly, "I am worried about Beth."

"Beth? You mean Trix, don't you?" looking up surprisedly.

Nell shook her head. "Trix is happy, and I hope has cause to be, but Beth is — wretched!"

"Wretched? Good heavens, Nell! How? Why? What makes you think so?"

“From her whole manner. She has grown so thin her clothes fairly hang upon her, and she flushes and pales at a word. Her eyes have a haggard, hunted look, her ways are abrupt, her speech bitter. I have heard her up in the night often, so that I know she does not sleep well; and once, when I crept to her door to ask what ailed her, I could hear her sobbing, and somehow I felt it was better not to let her know I heard.”

“Why, Nell, I can’t believe it! Don’t you know how gay she has seemed at times when the young people are here?”

“Yes, she will be quite herself for a week or so, and then come days of this other state, and it seems to take her all in a minute. This time I speak of, I had not noticed anything for a long time, till the afternoon Mrs. Godfrey and Thorne were here to dinner. We were speaking about Nora Winthrop’s return to her father’s, and Mrs. Godfrey was very cutting in her remarks upon the young grass-widows of today, don’t you remember? She said, ‘Girls nowadays seem to think matrimony a new fashion that they can try on and throw off again with perfect ease if it does not suit them; as if there were nothing binding or sacred in their marriage vows.’ I happened to be looking at Beth, and she turned so deathly white it startled me for a moment. But I know how she hates a scene, so I said nothing, and the minute dinner was over she left the room for some time. When she came back, she made an effort to be her-

self, but it was an effort, and it was that night I heard her sobbing so. Indeed, she has seemed downcast and wretched ever since."

"But how, in the name of sense, could those words affect our Beth?"

"That is the strange part of it."

"It must have been some sudden pain, or illness, something purely physical — O Nell, you don't suppose it's heart-disease, and she knows it herself, but won't tell us?"

Elinor grew pale at the thought. It might be. Their mother's trouble was with the heart, and this daughter might have inherited it, and only learned of it while away from home; for Elinor felt certain the change she noted dated back to the California trip, though, to be sure, she had laid all her queer-ness at first to grief for the dear mother. But — how one thing confirms another when we begin to construct a theory — did not this idea point to the intense emotion and utter misery Beth had shown at that time? Did not the poor child see in that sudden death but a prefiguring of her own doom? Was all her emotion merely the grief of a daughter for a tenderly loved mother, or did it possess elements of a more tragic nature? She shivered as she thus reasoned it all out, and turning to her sister, murmured, "O Clit! Do you think it can be that?" her dove's eyes filling with tears.

"It looks like it; such sudden flushing and paling, her dislike to going into company, and her con-

scientious efforts to attend to all religious duties. These things are not a bit like the old Beth. Poor child! She probably fears any excitement, and clings to her mourning to prolong her own life and health."

Clit's voice had sunk to a whisper, and the two sisters gazed into each other's eyes with an awed expression. To think that gay, laughing, audacious, unreligious Beth could be fighting alone and in silence a mortal disease seemed to both too terrible for belief!

"Oh, let us hope it is n't so!" breathed Nell, as if half suffocated.

"We must find out; we must help her, and—" began the elder.

"No, no, Clit! We must not even mention it to her. I have heard such a thing was sometimes fatal; that so long as the — the patient believed no one knew it, she could keep up, but so soon as she talked of it, she ran right down, or else — went suddenly!" and the girl trembled as she spoke.

"Perhaps you're right, dear," said Clit, with unusual meekness; for the head of the house, though able to cope with all managerial duties, felt powerless before this dread menace. "Then we must simply keep our own counsel, and help her all we can, in secret — our poor, poor Beth!"

They kissed each other with unwonted affection, their faces wet with tears, then went softly away to weep alone, their hearts almost broken because of

their sister's supposed bodily danger; yet did not that sister's soul-suffering constrain an even deeper pity? Poor, poor Beth, indeed!

From this day Beth took to poring over the newspapers as conscientiously as Clit herself, for now that she had been forced to turn her eyes toward that unhappy southern land, rent by civil strife, she felt it was impossible to take her gaze from it. The dispatches were only too meagre to suit her feverish longing for news, and events seemed to drag in a most tantalizing manner. Now that the war was over, why need there still be so much commotion, and what was all this quarreling and unpleasantness between that country and our own? Balmaceda was beaten, and a fugitive; why rake up any of our former acts as a nation, now? She was tired of hearing about reprisals, and all that. We ought to call our ships home, and give our poor sailors a furlough! Just why Beth was so anxious to see these marines released she did not explain, even to herself. What difference could it make to her? What interest could she feel in that part of our navy down on those Pacific waters? Ah, little Beth, it looked as if you were cheating your own heart those days!

When she saw the news of Balmaceda's suicide, in September, she felt a strange sense of happiness and expectation. This must end all strife, or necessity for strife. With the arrogant dictator dead, what more had Chile to fear? And she held her

self in an attitude of almost strained attention for days.

Meanwhile, Clit and Nell watched her furtively, and tried to save and help her in every way, noting plainly, as they did, the inner fever which seemed consuming her. Once, as the latter sprang to offer her the easiest chair, while they were gathered upon the veranda after the late dinner, Beth cried, laughingly, "Why, Nell, how ridiculous! I'm going to sit by Lala on the step. Really, you and Clit are getting so you actually coddle me," looking from one to another with affectionate eyes, "and I can't imagine why, I'm sure."

"Nor I," grumbled Lala, moving her muslin aside to make room for Beth. "They send me upstairs for you as if you were an old lady. For my part, I never saw a difference of four years give so many privileges before! It must be all because you have the plate and books, Beth," laughing mischievously. "I would n't have believed they could be so mercenary."

The older sisters' faces were flushed and conscious. "You're a saucy girl!" said Clit, in a provoked tone, "and what little you wait on Beth, or the rest of us, won't hurt you any."

"Oh, here comes Thorne!" cried Nell, with relief.

"Coming to see Beth again?" questioned inextinguishable Lala. "That's the third time this week. I declare, I do believe he means business!"

Beth sprang to her feet, white to the very lips.

"Laura Merritt, if you ever speak or hint such a thing again, I shall—leave home!" she said in a deep, tense voice which frightened them all. "Don't you dare to send for me to come down this evening!" she added, addressing the whole group, while her voice broke pitifully, and, hurrying away, she was heard running up the stairs in a furious manner.

Elinor sprang to look after her. "Dear! She'll kill herself running so!" she cried in terror, turning to Clit, while Lala, who had also risen, looked from one to the other in utter consternation.

"Well, of all the—thunderclaps!" she observed, finally. "What is the matter with her, anyhow?"

At this Elinor turned upon her with unprecedented severity. "If you *could* learn to control your tongue, Lala! You may have done incalculable harm by this."

Lala, attacked from such a direction, was powerless. She worshipped her sister Elinor, and went to her always for consolation; to have this dearest one turn against her was too much. Bursting into a flood of tears, she, too, ran inside, and Thorne, now at the foot of the steps, stopped in dismay at the sudden hegira, and the evident agitation before him.

Trix, who had taken no part, except to look from one to the other in angry astonishment at what seemed to her so great a commotion over nothing, stepped forward to meet him. "Come in, Thorne," she said, sarcastically, "don't be frightened. We are only rehearsing for private theatricals; and

two of the stars have failed in their parts — that's all."

She placed him a chair, took his hat, etc., and while she was thus making a womanly fuss over him, Clit whispered to Nell, "Do go to her! She may need somebody. Do you suppose—"

"Yes, Clit, it was undoubtedly the thought of how impossible love and marriage are for her that made her feel it so. And poor Thorne! It is easy to see how tenderly he loves her."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A QUESTION OF AGE.

IT was not a pleasant evening. Thorne had plainly seen Beth's sudden departure, as well as Lala's, at his coming, and was cut to the quick; nor could he fail to note the strangeness in the manner of the three left behind, for Trix was frankly annoyed, and the two oldest sisters worried and absent-minded. Elinor almost immediately excused herself, and ran up to Beth's locked door, both eager and fearful to offer assistance, only to be met by a quiet, "Who is it?" from within.

"I — Nell. Can I do anything for you, dear?"

"No, indeed!" The door was thrown wide, and Beth appeared, her cheeks crimson, and her eyes defiant. "What could you do? There is nothing the matter, only I am annoyed at Lala's coarseness, and I don't wish to see ——" her lips began to tremble, and she turned away without completing the sentence.

"I know, dear. It was too bad!" assented Nell, following her. "You need n't come down, if you don't wish to. I'll say you — you twisted your ankle, if you like ——"

"Why, Nell, that is n't true!"

"One *can't* always tell the truth!" was the desperate answer, while poor Nell, who would have suffered martyrdom rather than save herself by falsehood, felt her eyes fill with perplexed tears. "But I'll — I'll say anything you like, dear."

"Simply say I can't come down; I am indisposed," said the other, in a careless tone. "I often stay up here when you have company."

"But to Thorne, Beth? It seems so — cruel, does n't it?"

Beth gave her a look she could not fathom, so deep and strange it seemed.

"Nell," she said, putting both hands out, "for heaven's sake save me this! You must not even hint such things. Have I not enough to bear? Must you, my own sisters ——" her voice broke in a hysterical sob, and Nell cried, quickly, "No, no, dear. We won't, we won't! Don't agitate yourself so, Beth; indeed, you must not! I'll make it all right. Lie down, dear, do! I'll say you are n't feeling well, and, indeed, that's true enough; you show it. Won't you lie down, love?"

"Oh course I will, Nelly, if you make a point of it. Good-night, sister. You are too good to me! You make me think of Mother so. O Nell, Nell! if she could only be here! Sometimes I am almost ready to say, 'If I could only go there!'"

Elinor began to tremble. "Don't, don't, Beth!" she whispered, "oh, don't!" and, not daring to

trust herself further, turned and fled down the stairway.

Beth closed her door with some wonder. "One might almost think she understood!" she said to herself, beginning to unfasten her gown. "Dear Elinor was always so sympathetic! She seems to divine one's thoughts by instinct. It's in that she so resembles Mother. But how Lala does trench on sacred ground!" and she grew cold at thought of the abruptness with which that speech had seemed to tear away the coverings she had kept so closely swathed in, and leave her naked and ashamed.

Meanwhile, Elinor, below, had given Clit one quick, meaning glance, then said aloud, "I'm sure you will excuse Beth tonight, Thorne. She is not quite well, I think, and—and a bit feverish. I was glad to send her in out of the dampness."

"I hope she has n't taken cold," remarked Thorne with anxiety.

"Not at all," Trix put in, dryly; "only she has her megrims, and we all have to bow to them. Is Lala feverish, too, Nell?"

"I will go find her," was the answer, as Elinor, glad to make her escape and longing for peace with her little favorite, again departed.

After some time the two reappeared, Lala subdued, but cheerful; her sister still far from being her usual placid self. Thorne did not stay long, he felt the murkiness of the atmosphere, and resented, with an acuteness foreign to his nature, Beth's singular

treatment of him. He had noticed her capriciousness, of late, as well as the others, and had often sighed over it; though Mrs. Godfrey's sly and ambiguous remarks about girls in love being so often strange and incomprehensible had kept hope strong within him.

But tonight he went home sadly despondent. Did she wish to show him he must be only the friend, never anything more? Was there some one else? Could it be the new architect, who seemed to amuse her so greatly, or that Percy Lawrence, book-keeper at the mills; or *could* it be that loafer of a Ned Stacey, rich, indolent idiot that he was, who seemed to have the entrée of the house at any hour?

How was a man to know without asking, and how was a man to ask when bound hand and foot by gratitude and honor to an adopted mother, who would drive any daughter to desperation with her exactions and whimsies? The case seemed hopeless, and for a time he kept resolutely away, much to the inner relief of the Merritt family.

Elinor, without going into particulars, made Lala understand that her remark had been wounding and coarse to one of a sensitive nature, and the child, whose heart was greater than her discretion, became intensely penitent, offering to go and beg Beth's pardon on the spot.

"No," said Elinor, "not that. Never mention it again, dear, but show by your manner how you feel," and for a time their youngest so deported herself

that there were fears for her safety in their minds. Such angelic qualities could only mean swift translation for their candid, tormenting tornado of a Lala! But it did not last long. A woman cannot change her nature, nor a girl forget her foolishness, except after sorrow and change have lashed her into shape; so she was soon her old self again, her failings possibly intensified by the temporary check put upon them.

She came tearing in, one day, as the leaves were turning to the red and gold in which brave Summer decks herself to die, and announced, all in a breath, "The Greshams have come — just saw them getting out of the carriage. He's nice, and the little girl is lovely, but the aunt ——"

"What's the matter with her?" was the chorused question instantly sprung upon her, for Dick Hewson's few remarks about the aunt, Mrs. Weatherby by name, were so mysterious as to have inspired them all with the deepest curiosity.

"She's — well, she's awful! I never saw a woman so tall and thin, and her hair is red, and her eyes black — blacker than mine — and I declare, she made me think of a Gorgon, she gave me such a stony, petrifying stare."

"Dear me!" cried Trix, "how dreadful! But how does he look?"

"Oh, quiet and gentlemanly; nothing wonderful — but I never saw such hair as the little girl's — all over her shoulders like spun silk. I couldn't

see her face; she was just running into the house; but I know she's beautiful."

"And now, I suppose, Dick will soon be going," remarked Beth, with a regretful note, and, glancing up, started a little to see upon Elinor's face a strange look for her, who was usually so meek, a look of absolute exultation, it seemed.

"I don't think — that is — he said something last evening about staying on here," she ventured, timidly. "It seems, several have spoken to him about new buildings and improvements, and business seems to promise well. He likes it here better than the east; says we are more whole-souled and social. We take a man for what he is worth, without raking over the bones of his ancestors too closely."

"Would n't you know that was Dick?" laughed Lala. "Well, I do hope he will stay, he's so jolly!"

"So do I," returned Beth, her eyes still on Elinor, "because he is an honest, talented young man, with a great soul in his plain body, and I like him, thoroughly."

She finished her little eulogy with a sly smile, for she had noted a flash in her sister's eye, and the quick, grateful glance directed her way, and she thought, "Is it possible? Can our sweet Nell be in love with that careless, brilliant, talkative man? Surely, there is a perfect example of the attraction said to exist between opposite natures."

Dear, sweet Nell! how good he would be to her; and she is an ideal wife."

She fell into a musing fit, and was utterly lost to all that followed, for the next ten minutes. When she came to, they were in deep discussion over a party to be given the next night by a special friend of their mother's, Mrs. Judge Lawrence, at which she had made a point of their being present, declaring that their lightened mourning, and the select nature of the affair, made it proper and right that they should come, though they had attended no large evening gatherings, as yet. But perhaps her closing words had been the most convincing argument she could have used.

"You know, girls, I have never had a party without some of you to assist me, and I really feel that your dear mother would say now that I do right in begging you to come. Youth is the time for enjoyment, and while you never will forget so lovely a mother, she would not wish you to shut yourselves longer from the pleasures customary to your years."

So it was decided that some, at least, should attend. Lala, being still a school-girl, was not invited, but the rest were all expected, and Beth looked up now to ask, "Are you going to leave poor Lala here alone?"

"No," answered that young lady for herself, "I am going to stay all night with Josie Fifield, and we shall write our essays together. Wait till

next year, though, and then see who goes to the parties, my ladies!" with defiant nods all about her. "One more six months of grubbing, and then I'll be a butterfly, and outshine you all!"

"A glow-worm, don't you mean?" asked Beth, with a laugh. "Butterflies don't shine."

"Well, *I* shall, anyhow! What will you wear, Clit? Do dress young for once, and wear white."

"We don't all want to be the color of ghosts," put in Trix, "and Beth and I must wear white; there's nothing else for us. Besides, Clit will look splendid in black lace, with heliotrope knots—and heliotrope's all the rage now. Nell's to wear her pretty steel-colored crêpe du chine, and I my white organdie, and you, Beth—what have you decided on?"

"Nothing—yet."

"Just like you! And at the last minute, we'll all be kept scurrying right and left to find you flowers and fixings, of course. What can you wear in half mourning but your ivory crêpe and your pearls?"

"Nothing, I think," languidly, "and don't worry about my bothering you over my dressing, for I promise not to."

"I must tell John to order a carriage," mused Clit. "Let's see, there'll be just four—"

Elinor looked up. "Thank you, Clit, but I—I believe that's provided for," blushing rosily. "Dick Hewson asked if he might go with—us,

and he'll bring a large enough carriage for all."

"Why, he didn't speak to me about it!" said Clit, obliviously, while Beth suddenly stepped to Elinor's side.

"Dearest, I know you've something to tell us," she said, in a tender voice, "have n't you, Nell? Come, let us hear it."

"Well, yes, I've tried to get it out all day," giving a nervous little laugh, "but I could n't. Besides, I've expected him every minute, and — and there he comes now!" as a voice in the hall was heard saying, "Never mind, Rusha; I'll find them somewhere."

Then the door was flung wide, and Dick Hewson entered, radiant, good-natured, and proud as a prince. He walked past the astonished group, seeing only sweet Elinor, and, with a gentle deference, stooped and took her hand in his. "Have you told them?" he asked, and as she shook her head, he drew her up beside him, then threw back his own, and looked around upon them all proudly.

"Do you know," he said, with a thrill in his voice that moved them to the depths, "I have found the one great treasure of my life here in your home, and I want her for my own; may I have her? If I won't be selfish, may I have her, and still share her with you? And will you give a sisterless boy a place in your hearts as brother?"

There was an instant's silence, then Beth threw

her arms about her sister for a moment, after which she turned to the young man. "Dick, brother, be good to her, for she will be the blessing of your life!" she said, in a choked voice, and then they all gathered about with laughter and congratulations, tears and caresses, while Lala, I grieve to say, jumped up and down like a tom-boy, crying wildly, "Hurrah! Hurrah! It's my Nell first! It's my Nell first!" till Beth muttered, sharply, "Hush! You deafen me!" at which she quickly relapsed into comparative silence, until a sudden thought made her break out with, "Goodness me! Nell, but you're the oldest, aren't you?"

"I am twenty-four," she said in her sincere way. "I have never asked Dick his age," looking at her betrothed half curiously.

Dick threw a mystifying glance about him. "I believe I'll let you guess, then," he remarked, leaning back complacently. "We'll see how near you are to being good Yankees."

Lala at once cried, "Twenty-two," Trix ventured, "Twenty-three," Clit went back to twenty-one, and Beth, after a long look, said, "Nell's age — twenty-four."

"Now, it's your turn," he said, looking at the latter.

"I think Lala is nearest right," she said, blushing. "I am older than you."

He laughed a little, and drew from his vest

pocket a small, much-worn copy of the New Testament, while his amused face grew soft and solemn.

"This was my mother's gift on my last birthday before her death," said he, "and she died when I was ten years old. You may see the date, with her name and mine, on the fly-leaf, in her own hand. Calculate it for yourself."

Elinor took the little book reverently, feeling a swift rush of delight to be thus assured that her light-hearted lover read and pondered holy things, as the well-thumbed book denoted. She turned to the fly-leaf, figured a second, then looked up with a flushed, excited face.

"Is it possible? I can't believe it!"

"Tell us, Nell; tell us!" cried Lala in an agony, and she read,

"Richard F. Hewson,

From his mother, Charlotte Hewson,

On his tenth birthday.

October 1, 1871."

"Then he was born in '61, and this is — why, this is October 1, 1891, and he is — Dick Hewson, are you *thirty* years old today?" cried Clit in amazement.

He laughed consumedly. "I am, and here's my birthday present," catching Elinor's hand in his own.

"But *thirty years old!*" cried they all, unable to believe this beardless "boy" could really be a man, nearing the apex of human longevity.

"It is true," he assured them again, still convulsed at their expressions, "my dear little Testament cannot lie!"

"And I am so glad!" breathed Elinor. "That was all that troubled me."

"Dear heart, what difference could it make? What are times and years to true, loving hearts?"

"But it's so splendid this way!" cried Lala, exultantly. "And I'm *perfectly* satisfied with everything."

Beth, looking at the child's radiant face, felt a twinge of regret. Had she been given, and thrown away, the opportunity to give her this feeling of importance and content? She glanced at Clit, to see how she took it, but she was evidently as pleased as Lala. It suited her quite well to be Miss Merritt, an independent heiress, and mistress of this pretty home. She would never hold back her sisters from new ties in deference to her maturer age, now that things were so different with her. No, it was plain she did not envy Elinor; on the contrary, she said, blithely, "If it's your birthday, Dick, we must surely celebrate. You'll excuse me for a moment, and meanwhile, you must consider yourself our guest for the rest of the day."

"I am resigned!" he exclaimed, dropping quickly back into an easy-chair. "Bring on your chains, your thumb-screws, and your racks—"

'A hapless prisoner I'll be
For Libertee! For Libertee!'"

CHAPTER XIX.

BETH AND THORNE.

THE dinner which crowned this birthday and betrothal celebration was the *chef d'œuvre* of Charity's life, and she never tired of enumerating its excellencies, with always the added comment, "An' on'y fowh houhs to do it all, sah!"

But I doubt if the two for whom it was especially prepared fully appreciated its excellence. Dry bread would have been ambrosia, and cold tea nectar to them that day, so sublimated was their mood; but Lala, with her candid, school-girl appetite, was ready to do it fullest justice, if the others did not. However, happiness and jollity reigned supreme, and Beth, for the time being, kept her skeleton shut close in its closet, and was gayest of them all.

Dr. Hunter dropped in during the evening, and was very entertaining, but Beth never felt quite at ease in his presence. Her own troubles and errors had perhaps sharpened her vision, but she felt there was something evasive, and uneasy, in his manner, at times. It was odd, too, for Dick Hewson, equally a stranger, had never caused her an instant's feeling of doubt. She trusted him as she did Thorne.

Tonight, watching Trix's eyes soften when they met Dr. Hunter's and noting the color steal into her cheek when once or twice he spoke to her aside in lower tones, she felt once more that vague uneasiness which often haunted her when the two were together, try as she might to put it away as an unworthy suspicion, and almost treasonable to Trix. But aside from this slight shadow, it was one of the most delightful evenings of that summer, and, happy in Elinor's happiness, she slept that night with almost the old girlish quietude.

The next morning she searched the papers, as usual, and the news from Chile was given a larger space than at any time of late. The headlines spoke freely of the strong feeling which the country, especially that part of it represented by the navy of Chile, felt toward our government, and the question was plainly asked, "Are our gun-boats safe in Valparaiso Bay? Is not an attack upon them imminent at any moment?"

Beth read, and was wretched. A new feeling for her young husband stirred to life under these doubts concerning his safety. It is woman's nature to love the oppressed and suffering, and a soldier is always a hero to her. She spent the day almost alone, and announced at dinner, "I shall not go out tonight, girls, so do not count upon me. You will have just a carriage full without me, now Dick is to be your escort."

There was a hue and cry at this, mostly from Trix

and Lala, the latter saying, "Then you'll have to stay all alone, for I'm surely going to Josie Fifield's."

"I prefer to be alone," said Beth, wearily, "and Charity is always in the house. I have a headache, and — oh, I can't go! I would n't enjoy it."

"You need n't, dear," put in Clit, quickly, with unusual gentleness. "I'll have John lay a fire in the library grate, for it's cool this evening, and you can lie on the sofa there."

"Thank you, Clit, that will be nice! I believe I will slip on my faille tea-gown, and be down to see you when you start."

She did so, and was cozily fixed, a small table filled with books and magazines drawn to her side, when Dick Hewson called for the young ladies.

"What! sister mine, not going?" was his greeting. "Surely, you're not ill?"

"No, only a headache, and laziness. I am really too comfortable to move, and, fortunately, I knew I would be apt to feel this way, so sent my regrets by Rusha this afternoon."

He smiled. "You often feel 'this way,' Beth, don't you?"

"Yes, rather."

"It's hardly natural in a young girl," shaking his head a little; "and what business have you with headaches?"

Nell's entrance interrupted him, and he turned, all else forgotten, to greet his fiancée. "Nell, you

are exquisite!" he cried, rapturously, quite ignoring Beth's presence in his rhapsody. "That soft dove-grey is your own color, and sets off your shell-like complexion and lovely eyes to perfection. I would like to kiss you, if Beth was n't looking," proceeding calmly to do so.

Beth laughed amusedly, noting Nell's crimson shyness. "I do think, Dick Hewson, you are the most candid flatterer I ever saw!" she remarked, emphatically.

"I never flattered in my life," was his answer, in a tone of utter sincerity. "I mean every word I speak, now and always. If Nell's dress had been unbecoming, I should not have mentioned it at all, but as it is, why should I not say what I feel? There are too few kind things said in this world. Our censure is always ready for our friends before death, and our praise afterwards. Let me tell my kind thoughts while they will warm the hearts of those who listen."

Beth's eyes moistened as she saw the adoring look Elinor turned upon him. "Dick," she said, impulsively, "I'm glad *you* have our Nell! She is our sensitive plant, and I know you will be tender, appreciative, and true."

"God will judge!" he said, briefly, with one look at his loved one; and then Clit and Trix swept in, the one tall and handsome in her lace draperies, the other young, stylish, and *chic* in her fleecy white. The new brother-to-be gazed about appreciatively

"I'm the proudest man in this berg tonight! Come, my dear — come, girls, it's time we were off."

"You're sure you are comfortable, Beth?" asked Nell, looking back.

"Entirely, dear."

"And Charity is within call if you need her," added Clit, stopping to arrange the light wrap over the girl's feet. "Good-night, my Beth."

"O Clit, that was so like Mother!" She reached up her arms, and Clit bent to kiss her, while wondering Beth was sure she saw the glitter of a tear in her practical sister's eye, but before she could ask its cause, they were gone.

She lay back contentedly and stared at the fire, which the cool October evening made comfortable as well as cheery. She did not care to read, and just now her thoughts were not tormenting her, so in time her lids fell, and she slept. An hour, perhaps, elapsed while she wandered in dreamland, then a quick footstep sounded through the hall, there was a light tap on the door, and she looked up confusedly to meet Thorne's eyes, — Thorne in full evening dress, and looking exceptionally well, but for a somewhat worried expression clouding his face.

"Thorne?" she said, dreamily, and wondered why he stared so hard, not knowing how lovely she herself was with the flush of sleep and firelight on her cheeks, and her tumbled, curling hair falling about them, while the fluff of lace and ribbons on her loose

tea-gown seemed like the feathery calyx to her blossoming.

"Yes, Beth; may I come in? You have been asleep. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"I do believe I have, but never mind. Did you come from the party?"

"Yes, I ran away. I don't think any one will miss me, and I had something to say to you, alone."

Beth looked startled.

"You may think I should say it to Clit," seating himself near her, his hat still in his hands, "but after thinking it all over, I decided to come to you. Dr. Hunter seems very attentive to Trix, tonight."

"Yes," said Beth, vaguely, wondering what was coming next.

"But he should n't be, Beth. I've heard something. A man was in the office today who lives where Dr. Hunter came from, and he says he is — a married man."

"Oh!" cried Beth, sitting upright. "It can't be — poor Trix!"

"I'm afraid it is, Beth. I cross-questioned him closely. He says Hunter has not lived with his wife for three years, for she was never his equal, and it was through some entanglement while in college that he was almost forced into a marriage with her. He has applied for a divorce, but has difficulty in procuring it. The man's story was explicit, and when I confessed that my reason for asking such close

questions was because the doctor was apparently paying his addresses to a young lady here, he gave me such details as perfectly convinced me."

"The wretch!" cried Beth, excitedly. "How dare he sail under false colors, and introduce himself into our home for what he is not! Such duplicity is wicked — shameful!"

She stopped, suddenly pierced to the core by a knife-like thought, Is not his crime the same as your own? She shrank instantly, seeming almost to shrivel as her erect figure collapsed into a timid little heap; then, burying her face in the sofa-pillow, she groaned aloud.

"Beth, Beth, my poor darling! Don't take it so hard!" cried Thorne's voice above her. "It was dastardly, cowardly — the man must be punished — but surely it has not gone so far; Trix can't be really in love with him so soon?"

Beth shivered. "I don't know," she said, in muffled tones; "he has been here some time."

"I know it, the villain! What shall we do, Beth? I'll see him tonight, if you say so, but there's Trix — you can talk best to her."

"I?" moaned Beth, "I? O my God!"

"I know it's a hard task, dear. I wish I could save you from it. Such sin and shame should never come into your pure life if I could help it, and I will punish that wolf in sheep's clothing as he deserves! Beth, darling, listen to me, look at me! Give me a brother's privilege to straighten this

thing out for Trix. You know how I love you, how I have always loved you. Say I may call you my own, and be the champion for all your family. Oh, how proud, how glad it would make me !”

She threw up her hands, fairly striking back his own, which were near her half-hidden face ; she turned on him a countenance so woe-begone, so frightened, he hardly knew it, and whispered hoarsely, “Hush, hush ! Not another word. Go — leave me, quick ! I can’t listen. You — you insult me ! Oh, for mercy’s sake, go, Thorne, or I shall go mad ! I *cannot* stand it.”

The force of her imperious trouble was irresistible. He felt literally driven away, pelted from the room. But even the agony of his rejection was overpowered by the bewilderment of it. Why should she seem so horrified, so tortured ! Then, as he slowly passed out through the hall, the answer came like a flash of scathing lightning, “She loves the man herself !” and dazed, cowering, blinded, he stumbled down the outer steps, and plunged into the autumn darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

TRIX AND GLADYS.

BETH was in bed when the girls returned, and did not, as usual, call to them to come in and give an account of the evening. "She has gone to sleep; we won't disturb her," whispered Elinor outside the closed door, and they all tiptoed by to their own chambers.

Asleep! Ah, would sleep ever visit her burning eyes again? She held her breath till she heard their doors close softly, and even then stifled the sobs and moans which tore her. What misery had she not been the cause of, and what greater misery was yet to come? Oh, if she could die, and be out of it all! It seemed to her now as if she were tangled in a net whose meshes she could neither untie nor break through. Did she want to untie, or break through? Would she not be glad now to merely lie passive, only to be at rest?

At early daylight she was standing by Nell's bedside, knowing she would be alone now, for Lala was her roommate when at home; and the older sister woke in a fright to see her grey, haggard face bent above her own.

"Beth, you are ill? Oh, get in here quick, or you 'll take cold!"

"No," said Beth, creeping to her side, "I'm not ill; it's something else. Thorne came last night and told me that Dr. Hunter is a married man. You must tell Trix, for I cannot."

Elinor broke into exclamations and imprecations (if such reproaches as her gentle lips could form require so harsh a word), but Beth was still. It was not for her to condemn Dr. Howard Hunter, at least.

But soon Elinor remembered. "Forgive me, Beth, I was so excited. I'm glad you keep yourself so quiet, dear. Thorne should have told Clit, or me. We are — older. It has been a bad night, little one?"

"A very bad night, Nell."

Elinor drew her close. "You must be quiet, today, and keep your room. I will explain all. Poor little Trix! I'm afraid she cares a good deal. He was with her all last evening, the wicked deceiver! But there! Lie still, dear."

Beth, wondering at her sister's tone, but with a strong sense of peace and shelter in these loving arms, did lie still, and presently dropped asleep, utterly exhausted by the long, wakeful night hours. Perceiving this, Nell stole out softly and left her to the much-needed rest, shutting her in from the household noise while she went to consult with Clit and write to her betrothed, for she thought, with con-

fidence, "My Dick will know just what to do, better than we."

There was no doubt Trix felt the revelation keenly, softened as it was by Elinor's lips, but she was a proud, high-spirited girl who would not wear her heart upon her sleeve, even in the sympathetic presence of her sisters. Her eyes were shadowed by dark rings for many a day, her face was pale and unsmiling, and she kept a good deal to herself; but no one outside of the family noticed any change in her. She was prompt to explain to Elinor that the doctor had never ventured upon actual love-making, but had once confessed he had something weighing upon him which hindered his inclinations and his freedom; but she had supposed this some business difficulty, and the idea of a previous marriage had never occurred to her.

As to the young man, himself. After an interview with both Thorne and Dick, in which he acted the man, and actually made them sorry for him by a pathetic tale of youthful indiscretion, and subsequent misery, he was glad to leave town; and promptly turned over his patients to his colleague, telling them he was going further west, to try and find a livelier, and, if possible, more unhealthy, town in which to locate.

Meanwhile, the Merritt household settled down to a quiet that Lala was loud in pronouncing "abominably dull." Trix now shrank from going out as much as Beth, and spent a great many

hours in her own room, the weather being rather cool without; but one day it came off clear and of so summery a warmth that she betook herself to the hammock under the maple, her favorite lounging-place. She was lying quite still, and a tear or two had stolen down her cheek, when a little voice at her elbow piped up softly, "Is you asleep, Lady?"

Trix's eyes opened wide, and hastily brushing off the tears, she lifted her head to greet the little girl from next door, whom she had often seen flitting about the neighboring grounds.

"No, dear, not asleep. Would you like to come into the hammock with me?" lifting her in as she assented.

"I saw you here," explained the child, turning her great violet eyes up to Trix with perfect confidence, "and I fought you might be lonesome. Sometimes I is."

Trix smiled. "Surely; you have no little girls to play with. You must get lonely."

"I never do when Papa's wiv me, but Aunt Marfa is n't so — so — she does n't talk much, and then I is. I fink you have a lovely yard here! Has you any kitties?"

"Only one very staid old cat, my dear. You see, we are a family of sober old maids."

"I don't fink you is old," giving Trix a critical glance, "and I'm sure you's pitty. Do you know mine papa?"

"No, not yet."

The child laughed out gleefully, displaying two rows of seed-pearls between her perfect, dimpled baby lips. "Then I've got the start of Papa, just as I said I would! Only," sobering again, "after Aunt Marfa said that about 'designing 'pinsters,' Papa told me I mustn't talk about all you pitty ladies any more; it was n't nice."

"Indeed!" cried Trix, her cheeks on fire. "So your family have been discussing us, have you?"

Gladys looked at her gravely. "I don't fink it was 'cussing. I said dey was a lot of pitty girls next door, and Papa said yes, he had noticed, and I said 'I'm going to know 'em first,' and he said I mustn't be too sure, and then Aunt Marfa said you was all 'designing 'pinsters,' and Papa stopped laughing and told me we would n't talk 'bout the young ladies any more, 't was n't nice."

"Ah!" said Trix, "I see," and, mollified by this, she was soon having a delightful romp with the little Gladys.

From this interview grew up a warm intimacy between the two, and nearly every day brought the child over for a little visit. She had dear, baby ways which pleased them all, and they made a great pet of her, but Trix was plainly her favorite, and the cunning little bird-voice in which she would call up the stairway, "Miss Twits! Miss Twits! Isn't you coming down?" grew dear to

the girl, while who shall tell what healing for her heart-wound she discovered in this sweet child's love?

Dick soon brought the father to call, and they were thoroughly pleased with the reserved, scholarly man, but greatly dreaded the duty call upon Mrs. Weatherby which neighborhood courtesy demanded.

"Well, are the 'designing spinsters' all ready?" asked Trix, with unusual animation, as they began grouping in the lower hall one afternoon. "I want no absentees. We must proceed against the Gorgon *en masse*, or not at all."

"How thankful I am I'm not a 'designing spinster,' but only a school-girl!" laughed Lala, leaning against the newel-post. "Now march on, two by two! That's right; Clit and Trix, Nell and Beth, and all in your new fall suits so gay!" and to the music of her clapping hands and mocking laughter, they started out, "to come, to see, to conquer" — but we will reserve that campaign for a future chapter.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GORGON.

IT was a week later, and the morning of the 17th, when Beth woke to a beautiful dawning, with the cry of "Lester!" on her lips. She could not at first recall what induced the cry, only that she had dreamed of him in some confusing, horrible way; but in time the vision became more plain. She had seen him in a narrow, unfamiliar street; there had been running, jostling figures, and hoarse cries. He had seemed at bay, and there had been fighting, hot and fierce, over which she had held her breath in terror, but the cry had been wrenched from her by seeing him fall, wounded and bleeding.

She shuddered as she recalled the details, then sprang from her bed, glad to see the early sunlight peeping through her window. She threw it wide, and looked out. It was a glorious morning, clear as crystal, and with that exhilarating hint of frost which is to the atmosphere what the bead is to champagne.

"It was a bad dream," she whispered, trying to shake it off as she hurried to splash the cool water over her head and face. "I must look out

for the news from Chile today, though, of course, this is only a dream."

But when she opened the paper, the news was tame and meagre, so, somewhat reassured, she sat down to her breakfast with a tolerable appetite. Rusha brought in the postman's budget as they still dallied over their coffee, and after opening one of the missives distributed among the five, Clit looked up from her own to say, "I've a note from Mrs. Godfrey, inviting Elinor, Beth, and myself to dinner next week to meet some relatives of Thorne's who are visiting there, a gentleman and wife who are staying but a few days. Will you go, girls? By the way, Dick is invited, Nell."

"I am agreeable," smiled the latter.

"And I am not," muttered Beth, with a flush.

"Oh, do go, Beth; 't will do you good. You're getting horridly mopy staying at home so much!" urged Lala.

"Yes, Beth, I really think you'd better," added Clit. "It will be a quiet little affair, only ten covers, she says."

Beth shut her lips together. "I shall have to be excused, Clit. Please send my regrets, and — and don't worry me — I *can't* go!" her voice beginning to break.

"You shall do just as you choose, of course, my dear — there! Lala, no remarks, please. You are not to lay down the law for Beth."

"Humph! She's getting to be a perfect *stick*!"

muttered the youngest, and still muttering, but kept in check by Clit's severe eyes, she flounced from the room.

No more was said regarding the dinner. Each went about her Saturday morning duties, Lala betaking herself to her violin practice, and Beth to the owl's nest, while the other three repaired to the library with their sewing, and a book for alternate reading aloud.

As they were sitting thus, Trix had a full view of the Gresham residence, both side and front, and presently she saw the Gorgon come out of the side door and look in a ruminative way toward their house. Their formal visit upon Mrs. Weatherby had but confirmed their former impressions. They had found her stiff, cold, and repellant, with her weapons always at hand, and ready to fling at any one who ventured into her vicinity. But they also perceived that, though so disagreeable, she was an exquisite housekeeper, neat to daintiness, and conscientiously exact in every little detail. The house was absolutely spotless, the servants moved like machines, while the afternoon tea and cakes with which she grimly served them were of an aroma and flavor which bespoke close attention and decided skill.

What Mr. Gresham lacked in companionship from this grenadier of an aunt was doubtless made up to him in a perfectly appointed ménage. When Clit praised the cakes, and asked for the recipe, saying

that since her mother's death she had often been at a loss to please the household in this line, the icicle began to thaw; and when Elinor audaciously passed her cup for a second filling, saying she had never even imagined such tea, the Gorgon nearly melted into a woman, and even condescended to remark, after they had gone, that it was refreshing to meet young ladies who "sometimes remembered there were subjects of conversation outside of dress and the beaux!" She had returned the call with military promptness, and had been astonishingly affable, but no further intimacies had taken place.

Trix watched her, this morning, as she lifted her lank skirts and stepped high over the dew-laden grass, much as a cat minces through snow, and said, "Look, girls! What is the Gorgon going to do?"

She hitched along the hedge till she came to the gap which gave communication between the places, then passed through.

"Yes, she is coming over," Trix went on; then a smile broke all over her face. "Wait! I've an idea; do just as I tell you."

She snatched away Clit's embroidery and Nell's ribbon-work, flinging them out of sight in a cabinet, and presently the two found themselves covered with large gingham aprons from Charity's store, and each holding a crash towel waiting for its hem, while a basket of stockings stood close by. She had barely time to resume her own seat, her eyes all

a-twinkle with fun, and an oil-cloth-covered volume in her hand, when they heard Rusha ushering in the caller. Trix began to read sonorously, “‘When this mass has reached a perfect state of fermentation it is ready to be made into a loaf. Do not add the flour too rapidly, but beat it in little by little, till ’” (here the library door opened, but Trix was oblivious) “‘till it is thick enough to be moulded with the hands, then ’— why, my dear Mrs. Weatherby, is it you? Pray come in, and do excuse our work !”

The Gorgon looked about upon the industrious group, and her severe features relaxed. “Ah, you are busy, indeed, and you were reading —”

“Oh, just the cook-book,” cried Trix, airily, while Clit and Nell rose, trying to keep their faces straight and voices steady, “one of us nearly always reads aloud.”

“Certainly. An excellent plan !” She was actually almost smiling, and Clit congratulated herself that, yesterday having been sweeping day, the house was well polished.

Trix laid down her book and seized a stocking from Rusha’s basket. “I ’m sure you ’ll excuse our industry, Mrs. Weatherby, we never like to put away the clean clothes until all are mended.”

The old lady answered graciously that young people never appeared to greater advantage than when industriously employed, then made her errand known, which was to ask what they knew of a

domestic she was about to engage, who once lived with them. Clit told her the simple truth, and after a pleasant chat, the visitor rose to go, inviting them to be neighborly and run in whenever at liberty, again complimenting their busy ways.

But here Nell's honesty broke through all restraint. "I'm afraid, Mrs. Weatherby," she said, gently, "we are not always so industrious. We used to do these things, but since Rusha came —"

"You don't always need to? Certainly not. I don't believe in encouraging idleness in servants, but it's a good deal for young ladies to *know how*, nowadays!" and having thus delivered herself, the long, strong, uncompromising female stalked out, secretly well-inclined toward the trio.

She was barely out of hearing when Trix broke into a merry laugh. "You goose of a Nell! Why must you spoil my little comedy with your blundering honesty?"

"But, Trix, it was n't right —"

"Was, too! I did not pretend to a bit of knowledge that we do not possess. We have done all these things the greater part of our lives, without feeling it degrading or burdensome. We simply don't have to, now. But I knew it would please her — and it did! In one sense there was no deception. I've pored over cook-books enough, if I don't read them aloud, for steady diet; and the towels we've hemmed, and stockings we've darned (both ways!) would stock a country store. I simply gave the

Gorgon a glimpse of us as we have been, and can be again, and so drew the malignity from her dreadful eyes."

Elinor shook her head, but forbore to argue longer, perhaps only too glad to see the smiles play over Trix's face again, to cloud it with further censure.

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. GODFREY'S DINNER PARTY.

THE dinner party was not graced by Beth's presence, but the two oldest sisters attended. Mrs. Godfrey was proud of her little dinners, and with reason. They undoubtedly owed their gastronomic success to an old "auntie" who had lived with her since girlhood, and was one of those cooks "born, not made," who are often found among the dusky race. But certainly the decorating, and also the grouping of the guests, were due to her own considerable taste and skill, as she often took pains to remark. Besides, as an occasional hostess Mrs. Godfrey was delightful. It took a closer intimacy to reveal those traits which made daily existence with her a discipline.

Today, besides the guests in the house and the three Misses Merritt, she had invited only Dick Hewson, young Mr. Stacey, and an old bachelor friend, Colonel Hogarth. Beth's place was now supplied by Miss Adams, making the number, ten, complete, and giving the latter, who had secret inclinations toward the lazy young Stacey, an evening of supreme content.

When the Merritt sisters entered, they were introduced to Mrs. Lewis, of California, and a moment later the reverend gentleman of fine presence, now talking to Miss Adams, was presented as "a relative of Thorne's," and proved to be her husband. As he bowed to Clit, he remarked with a smile, "Your name has a familiar sound to me. It is associated with one of the most romantic incidents of my life."

Scenting a story, and knowing he told them well, Thorne whispered to Elinor, "Come closer. This cousin of mine is going to give us something worth hearing."

"Ah!" Clit was responding, as they stepped forward, "Could we share it with you, or is it private property, Mr. Lewis?"

"Not at all, Miss Merritt. A minister is seldom blessed with private property that is all his own. But, imagine, if you please, an ancient hacienda under California's clear sky, basking in the heat of a noonday sun. In the centre of the square old adobe building is a palm-surrounded court, its hard earthen floor half covered with rugs and matting. An elderly gentleman in feeble health sits in a reclining-chair, attended by a man of severe dignity, while my wife, curious and amused, is gently rocking opposite. The Japanese portière shading one of the many doors which surround this court is pushed aside, and an Indian woman advances. She is straight and comely, with bright eyes and a satisfied expression. She draws back the tinkling portière with a

flourish, and enter—the handsomest couple you ever saw in your life! He, a naval officer, magnificent in his uniform, she, a charming, shrinking, pale young figure, evidently overwhelmed with the strangeness of her situation. They advance; all rise, and step forward. The old gentleman takes his place near the young lady's side; my wife, with an instinct of which she never quite divests herself” (flashing a laughing glance in her direction), “supports the handsome young officer on his, and I ——”

“You marry them?” questions Elinor under her breath, a puzzled expression in her upturned eyes. “How—how strange!”

“How natural, my dear young lady!” laughed the minister.

“But I meant—I suppose there are many such haciendas there, though?”

“Hardly so fine as this one, most of them. It belongs to a rich family sufficiently Americanized to take pleasure in beautifying it. But it was a pretty scene, and has always lingered in my memory. The lady's name was Merritt.”

“Dinner is served, Madam!” here sounded from the doorway, and the gentlemen were at once told off to their respective ladies, the minister escorting the hostess.

Clarissa, who fell to Thorne's lot, remarked, with a note of wonder, “How oddly some things tally in this world! That party was so like Grandfather's,

and in just such an old hacienda, and with our name, too! Did he say when this happened?"

"No, he did not," said Thorne, who was very thoughtful. "I might ask him."

But he could not just then, as the minister was quite at the other end of the table, and busily engaged in conversation.

"You say this Mr. Lewis is your cousin, Thorne?" continued Clit.

"Yes, or rather was my father's, though they were brought up like brothers, and were deeply fond of each other. I was named for him, and have always been taught to call him Uncle John. But father dropped the first name calling me Thorne. He has lived west for many years, and I have not seen him before since his marriage. We like his wife exceedingly. She is much younger than he."

"So I thought. Still, he is by no means old, and very entertaining. She has a sweet face, but looks delicate."

"Yes; could not live, he thinks, in any other climate. They are on their way to Pennsylvania, now, to look up some property matters."

All this in a low tone, lost in the buzz of settling in their places, then the conversation became more general. Several extra guests were invited for the evening, and Mr. Lewis was in too great demand among older friends for the sisters to see much more of him, while they, fully occupied with the younger part of the company, let the strange impres-

sion of the California incident gradually wear away.

Not so Thorne. Those singular words of Beth's, "You insult me!" which had so stung him when he offered his manly love and brotherly protection, still rang in his ears. Could even a secret preference for Dr. Hunter explain them? And besides, had she not, at first, been as fierce as he himself in her denunciation of the man? No, his hasty supposition was growing untenable in the clearer light of sober second thought. There was something back of all this. Beth had been greatly changed ever since her return; and could even her mother's death, and later a secret, suppressed passion, fully account for it? Thorne told himself they did not.

Still, though the incident related by Mr. Lewis had sent a quick shock through him, he felt it could not refer to Beth, personally. But possibly something had happened. There might have been relatives in California; there might have been circumstances, strange, perhaps unpleasant, which had affected the girl. At any rate, he must know more. No rejection, however brusque and painful, could overthrow the love of a lifetime, a love so supported by firm friendship and principle that its foundations were too solid to be lightly shaken. Let Beth be in trouble, and he would always be at hand to help her. As for his own feelings, they must be put aside in consideration of her interests.

So, a somewhat absent host, he assisted his lady

guests to their carriages and said good-night to the inmates of the household. But as he was turning away, Mr. Lewis observed, carelessly, "Fine looking girls, those Misses Merritt, and what's queer, the second one,— Miss Elinor, is n't she? — reminds me of that little bride in California. Odd thing, these coincidences, are n't they? You look tired, my boy."

"I am tired, Uncle John; these dinner parties 'worritt' me a little, as our good old auntie says, though I don't know why they should, when Mother is so thoroughly capable of managing them."

"I think most men find them a bore," remarked that lady from the sofa, where she had dropped before the door had fairly closed upon her last guest. "And I must say the responsibility is something fearful! Thorne, we shall have to try Dietrich's waiters next time. Positively, that man Greene sent us today was shabby! I noticed his cuffs were all frayed at the edges as he handed the soup. It's scandalous!"

"Yes," said Thorne, wearily. "And, Uncle John, I want to hear more of that story, but not till morning. Let me sleep, first. Good-night, all!" and he was off, to toss and turn till nearly daylight, wearying the still night hours with ceaseless regrets, remembrances, and conjectures.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE REVELATION.

THE next morning was chill and cloudy, and Beth, who felt the changes of temperature as she never had in her former healthy girlhood, was cowering over a freshly-kindled fire, after breakfast, when Rusha brought in the somewhat delayed mail. No one else was in the room but Lala, her head between her two hands as she agonized over her Rhetoric, with eyes shut and lips mumbling cabalistic sentences in which such words as "syntax," "orthography," "style," and so on, frequently occurred.

Beth, after glancing at the one letter addressed to Elinor, presumably only a note from Dick, languidly picked up the damp journal and spread it over her knees to dry. It had grown a habit to look for Chile items, but there had been little to interest her, lately. The war was over, though the people still seemed unable to subside from their ferment, while the newspaper talk for and against our minister, Mr. Patrick Egan, held no interest for her.

"Any news, Beth?" asked Lala, stopping her mutterings for an instant.

"No, I think not," giving it a cursory glance. "I believe there's been a cyclone or two, but they're getting so common they don't count. Nothing short of an earthquake affects us now."

"Aren't there any fashion articles, or descriptions of balls?" asked the young miss, with an intense craving for details of excitements in which she had never yet shared.

"I don't see any."

"Humph! How stupid these newspapers are getting!" and she again subsided into syntax.

Beth turned to the foreign-news column and ran her eyes over its headlines. Hah! What was this? and she bent eagerly over the account of that 16th of October when a saloon brawl between one of our United States sailors and a Chilean caused the assault upon nearly every American marine who ventured to show his face in the narrow streets of Valparaiso. Below the account, which she read in a fever of haste and turmoil, were the names of the injured, and here, with eyes grown wide with horror, she saw, as in a fiery glare, the words, "Lester Palmerlee, Lieutenant on the 'Charleston,' fatally wounded with a *machete*, in head and breast."

Lala's studies were suddenly interrupted by a gasping cry, and to her consternation, she saw Beth swaying in her chair, and only saved her from a dangerous fall by a spring like a young deer. Beth's head fell limply against her arm, and the girl's shrill screams soon brought the frightened household.

"O Clit!" groaned Elinor, after one look, "it has come!" and the two sisters tenderly bore the one they believed stricken with a mortal weakness to the couch near by.

But Beth's eyes soon opened under their vigorous efforts at resuscitation, and the youthful color crept back into cheeks and lips. "What is it?" she asked, wonderingly, then turned away. Memory had come back to her, and she knew she must ask no questions, show no emotion.

Elinor leaned over her. "Are you better, darling? Here, drink this, please."

"Was it a sudden pain, Beth, dear, or a weakness only?" questioned Clit, on her knees at the girl's side, holding a glass of cordial in her shaking hand, while Elinor doled out the mixture.

"It was — a pain," said Beth, faintly, and the older sisters looked into each other's eyes despairingly. Then they considerately withdrew, telling her she needed rest, and calling Trix to sit beside her for awhile.

"Don't talk to her," whispered Clit. "Just sit still within call."

"But what is it?" asked the startled girl.

"O Trix, Trix, I'm afraid! You know what ailed Mother?"

"Heart-disease — but Beth? O Clit, not that!"

Clarissa caught her hand. "Not a word — not a sound, Trix! She must *not* be agitated. Can you control yourself?"

Trix nodded, gulping back her tears heroically, and soon glided into her place, glad the room was darkened so that Beth might not notice her looks. But she need not have feared. Her sister lay motionless, her face to the wall, and neither spoke nor stirred.

While Trix silently took her seat, the two oldest were consulting in the drawing-room. Should they send for a physician? If they did, would it startle Beth? Or, should they treat it lightly, as the result of fatigue and the heat of the fire? While they thus consulted, in low, stricken tones, the outer hall-door opened, and they heard a man's step in the hall. "Thorne!" cried both, simultaneously, and hastened to intercept him.

He stopped short and turned upon them a pallid, distressed face. "Where is Beth?" he asked, huskily. "I must see Beth — and alone. I have something to say to her."

"You must wait, Thorne," said Clit. "Come in here a minute. We have something to say to you, first. Beth has just fainted away, and is in the library."

"Fainted away? Why, has she heard? What made her faint?"

"You tell him, Elinor," urged the oldest, growing suddenly weak.

"No, no, I can't!" and Elinor turned abruptly away. "Go on, and have it over with."

"Beth has heard nothing," said Clarissa, solemnly.

"She was sitting quiet and alone, but for Lala, over the library fire, and suddenly gasped and fell. The child saved her from the grate, and screamed for us. We've posted her off to school, and she doesn't know, but Thorne, poor Beth is going like our mother. It is heart-disease!"

"No such thing!" exclaimed the young man, with a brusqueness which made the others jump. "What was she doing? Was she reading anything? I can explain all."

"She had the daily paper—there was nothing in it. Thorne, how can you know more than we, who have watched her every breath so long?"

He did not even notice the reproach in Elinor's voice, as she thus came to her sister's support.

"Bring me the paper," he ordered, in that same repressed, almost rough tone, "let me see it."

Clit went for it, first exchanging a glance of dignified displeasure with her sister. This was not their usual gentle, helpful, brotherly Thorne. He seemed not only devoid of feeling, but downright rude today! She brought the paper. He turned at once to the foreign news, and running his eyes down the lines, found the name he had expected to see.

"Heart-disease!" he muttered, so low they barely caught the words, "soul sickness, poor child!" Then louder, "Girls, you think me unfeeling, but you don't understand! I must see Beth; she will be the better for seeing me, I do believe.

And put this fear of coming death out of your minds, my poor cousins! That is not what ails Beth."

They gazed at him as if he were demented. When one adopts a hypothesis and builds upon it as they had upon this, every smallest event confirms it. So absolutely did they now believe in Beth's illness that even a physician's verdict could scarcely have convinced them otherwise. As he started out, Nell caught his arm. "For heaven's sake, Thorne, be cautious! Be gentle! Don't make her worse."

Thorne gently shook her off. "My dear Nelly, I want to make her well. I mean to save her. Let me go!" and reluctantly they yielded to his stronger will.

For Thorne knew perfectly well what he was about. He had sought an interview with his uncle directly after breakfast, that morning, and asked more about the California incident—asked to his own undoing, poor fellow! For, as the story progressed, he became convinced that Beth was its heroine. Every circumstance of names, situation, personalities, confirmed the growing impression, and when he brought his mother's album and laid it on Mr. Lewis's knee, it was with but one last shred of hope to cling to.

"Look that through, Uncle John," he said, hoarsely, "and tell me if you find any face there that was among those California people." He

knew Beth's photograph, taken a year before, was between its leaves.

Mr. Lewis turned the pages slowly, and with care, till near the middle. Then he stopped abruptly. "Here is the bride, herself!" he exclaimed in a tone of absolute conviction, and Thorne, looking over his shoulder, turned sick with wounded faith and love, for the bride was little Beth, indeed!

The minister looked up. "Then you do know her? She is of this family?"

"Uncle John, I can't deny it! That photograph is an excellent one of her whom we know as Miss Elizabeth Merritt, the third sister."

"Do you mean, Thorne, that this girl has kept her marriage a secret?"

Thorne nodded, and the other uttered an exclamation. "It is incredible! But why? All was in order; her grandfather present; everything legal and proper. I can't imagine such a thing!"

"She must have found out something later," groaned Thorne. "Perhaps he had — another wife."

"I can hardly believe it. He was very young, and a perfect gentleman. His face was an open, honest one, and the old man seemed sincerely fond of him. He told me how hard it was for them all to have the young middy ordered off to Chile so suddenly, and his voice quite trembled with feeling. It's the strangest thing I ever knew! Of course,

men often deny a marriage to suit their own nefarious purposes ; but for a woman, a girl, gently bred and religiously trained, it is incomprehensible, unless she had been under strong restraint. You're *sure* her sisters do not know?"

"I am sure of nothing — now!" protested poor Thorne. "But I cannot believe they do. Uncle John, I don't need to tell you this must be our secret for the present. Do not breath it even to your wife till I see you again. I must talk with Beth. The girl is dying by inches under the weight of this concealment; I can see it all now! And I must help her in some way. I must share its guilt with her, if necessary. You promise me?"

"Certainly, Thorne. Forgive me, if I ask what I have no right to; do you love her, my boy?" Thorne bowed his head.

"My son, God help you, then! But it may be the escape of your lifetime, for it must be a strange, determined nature to persist in such a course. This will soon cure your fancy."

"It is no fancy, Uncle. I love her, pure or guilty! It has been the one feeling of a lifetime, and I cannot shake it off in a minute. Does God deal so with us sinners?"

"I am properly rebuked, Thorne! God speed you, then, for I perceive you are a man to be trusted even in so delicate a mission. Good-bye!"

and he wrung the young man's hand in a burst of admiration and affection.

All this had passed while Beth was making her belated toilet, and sitting over the library fire, and now he was at the door. "Trix, will you leave me alone with your sister a moment?" he asked of the silent girl, whose throat was aching with the pressure of sobs she dare not give vent to. He was gentle enough now—subdued even—and a hopeless expression gave him the appearance of many added years.

Beth turned, as he spoke, and looked at him; then raised herself upon one elbow, her eyes gleaming almost madly in the darkened room. "What do you want, Thorne?" was her querulous question. "I am ill today—did n't the girls tell you?"

He waited till the door closed upon Trix. "Yes, I know, Beth. I know—*all!* I have come here to help you tell the truth, and rid yourself of this secret that is crushing your life out."

Beth felt her face stiffen with terror under his intent gaze. "You know?" she whispered, staring blankly.

"Yes, dear child! Did n't they tell you the name of the relative who is with us?"

"No," said Beth, "I came down late; they had finished breakfast. Is his name—*what* is his name?"

"The Reverend John Thornton Lewis."

Beth neither gasped nor screamed. She only brought her hands together sharply, and said, "Well?"

"Of California. He married you to Lieutenant Lester Palmerlee last June."

Beth dropped back on the pillow. The revelation had come, and she was alive. Nay, more, she felt easier, lighter, more comfortable! The burden was loosened, she could breathe freely once more. There was intense silence for a moment, then she said softly, "Thorne —"

"Yes, Beth."

"It's all true! I kept it for one reason and another, till I *could n't* tell. It seemed impossible! I have been a fool, and worse — but ah! how I have been punished! Thorne, my husband is fatally wounded; even now he may be dead! What can I do?"

"Then he is your husband?"

"Is my *husband*? What do you mean?" sitting upright to glare at him.

"I don't know — I thought there must be something — that you were ashamed —"

"You need n't go on, Thorne!" She was standing erect now, drawn to her fullest height, and instinct with womanly indignation. "He is my husband, indeed, my very own, and I love him! Yes, I do. I *love* him! I have n't seemed to; I turned from him after Mother's death, and thought I could never see him again, because together

we had deceived her so. He was at the other end of the world, and could never find me, I thought, and no one knew. I simply let it all go, as if it had never been, and kept still. But my heart would n't keep still! Oh, how I suffered! He was mine, and I cast him off. Thorne, I must go to him; I must care for him. He may not be so badly hurt as the paper said. O Lester, my husband, live, live to forgive me!"

She sank back in a flood of tears, and Thorne, forgetful of self as ever, hastened to call the sisters, and place her in their care. He had soon told the story, and though they could scarcely take it in, that acquired instinct of saving Beth, of keeping her from excitement and trouble, made them quick to understand and wise to act.

"We know the whole, poor child!" was all Clit said, as she took her into her motherly arms, and Elinor, kneeling by her side, added gently, "Don't you know what Mother used to say when we were naughty, Beth? 'One short, repentant cry, then on to better things!' Let's try and do so, now."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THORNE'S DEPARTURE.

WHEN Beth found that, though the revelation was made, the world still preserved its equilibrium, she began to gather her bewildered senses together, and soon focussed them upon one idea, that she must go to her husband, and, if possible, save his life. When she said this in a tone which admitted of no denial, they called Thorne in again to the discussion.

"Thorne," cried Beth, as he entered, appealing cruelly to his unselfishness out of her own self-absorption, "Thorne, you'll be on my side, surely! You see — you *must* see — there is only one thing to do, find my husband, and bring him home."

He looked at her for a moment without answering. Beth had grown to look exceedingly delicate and frail, of late, but the indomitable resolution in her eyes seemed still unquenched.

"Somebody should go," he said, finally.

"Yes, and who but I? It is my one reparation for these months of silence. Indeed, I must go!"

"It would be a hard journey, and you are not very strong, Beth. Then the difficulties after you

arrived there would be great. How could a woman — a mere girl — go about from ship to ship among those rough men, where everything is in so turbulent a state? It would be almost impossible."

"I must do it — I must!" reiterated Beth.

Thorne was still a moment, his eyes on the floor. Clit, at Beth's side, watched him anxiously, while Elinor, drawn back a little, silently wiped away her tears. At length he looked up. "Beth," he said, in his calm, passionless voice, "*I* will go for your husband."

"You, O my good Thorne! Heaven will bless you for this."

A gently ironical smile just touched his lips. Heaven did not seem to be showering him with blessings these days; instead, he would have averred it was depriving him of everything he most desired upon earth. But it was not for him to murmur; only to go on and act as he had schooled himself to do through a noble life.

Beth spoke again: "But how can you go, Thorne, and leave your business?"

"I will tell you. The firm have been wanting some one to visit San Francisco in their interests for some time, but no one has seemed ready to undertake the trip. If I will go, they'll gladly give me the extension of time I should need for my journey to Chile."

"And tell them, if they will, all your expenses shall be my affair," cried Beth, eagerly. "O

Thorne, my more than brother! If you will do this for me, and bring back my Lester, you shall have my gratitude, my prayers, my sisterly devotion — Ah! what are words? I can never repay you!”

She stopped, choked with emotion, and Thorne gently touched her hand. “You have repaid me all your life, dear sister,” he said, softly, and after brief adieux was gone.

That very night he started, and Beth had nothing to do but wait for news. Nothing else to do, so, like the rest of us miserable mortals, when driven to the wall, she turned to God in prayer.

Ah! the greatness of that condescension which will bend a forgiving ear to even such belated petitions as these.

While Beth prayed and wrestled, every thought and emotion given to her long-disowned husband, and longer-despised Savior, her heart grew wide and tender, her manner gentle, her speech mild, and the poor whom she now visited, because in her sorrow she had become one of themselves, watched for her, eager to pour their troubles into her sympathetic ear. If Lester ever returned, it would not be to the old Beth, impatient, self-absorbed, and imperious of will; but to a gentler, sweeter wife and woman than her girlhood had ever promised him.

Her marriage was promptly made known to the little public about them, and the keen thrusts she suffered from curious people, who are like surgeons' probes and scalpels, would once have made her furi-

ous and bitter, but now she met their inquisitiveness with so brave and womanly a front that its edge was quickly blunted.

In fact, she was so lavish of self-censure that she left little to be said by others, and the severest critics half forgave her because of the delight they experienced in meeting with so novel a romance in their very midst. For, as usual, the world's judgment was biased by prejudice, and alone would simply have done her harm. It was before the bar of her own conscience, informed by the Divine justice, that she made her honest plea of "Guilty," and bent with meekness to receive her sentence. Would God be merciful and let her make atonement to her husband and the world, or would He mete out the full measure of her punishment, and leave her to life-long repentance in the dismal cell of forced inaction? In dread suspense she waited.

The news did not reach the Gresham household for some days. An exceedingly bleak and rainy week had prevented any running to and fro, and Mr. Gresham, little inclined to linger among the male gossips down town, was always slow to hear news; but he did at length learn of it on the street, and repeated it without comment at the dinner-table that night.

"It is n't Miss Trix?" asked Mrs. Weatherby, with a startled look.

"No," returned her nephew, in a tone which had a hint of exultation in it, "it is not Miss Trix; it is the

one they call Miss Beth. I have only met her once or twice."

"Yes, the invalid. She keeps her room a good deal, and has n't much to say for herself. Her name's Elizabeth. Gladys, you're dropping your milk from your spoon at every mouthful. Well, I must say," returning to her muttons, "it's rather a new thing for a woman to deny her marriage. Girls nowadays are too apt to be in such indecent haste to get husbands that they take the first chance that offers; but I've noticed these Merritt sisters are quite unusual in some ways."

"My Miss Twits is the nicest," put in loyal Gladys, balancing the offending spoon with extreme care as she spoke, and with the words, that young lady appeared in the doorway, her face plainly showing perturbation.

"Mrs. Weatherby," she said, quickly, "could you come over? Beth is ill, and seems so strange we don't know what to do."

"Has any one been for the doctor?" asked Mr. Gresham, rising from the table.

"No, sir, not yet. Lala and I are alone — it's even Rusha's afternoon out, but —"

"Let me go, then," he said, briskly.

"If you would be so kind! And could you come over, Mrs. Weatherby?"

"Certainly," with alacrity, for nothing pleased the woman like being appealed to in cases of sudden illness.

"And Gladys, let her come, too; I'll look after her."

"It will be her bedtime soon," said the aunt, implacably, "and Jane can look after her."

"Oh, p'ease let me go, Aunt Marfa! I'll be as still as a mousie. May I, Papa?"

"I'll bring her over at bedtime," pleaded Trix, and the Gorgon yielded.

Beth's illness was not alarming, though it looked so. A telegram from Thorne at San Francisco, that morning, told her that he was off for Chile in half an hour, and the long tension, broken by positive news in any shape, let her nerves relax so suddenly that she fell into a sort of comatose condition, from which it was difficult to rouse her. Elinor and Clit were both out of town overnight on a shopping excursion to a neighboring city, and the two youngest girls felt unfitted to cope with illness. But Mrs. Weatherby was in her element. She soon diagnosed the ailment aright, and said to anxious Lala, who was hovering about in a nervous way, "There's nothing to be frightened about. She's simply worn out. That is all, and she needs sleep. Don't try to rouse her, to make her eat. She does n't need food, but she does need rest. Like as not the poor thing has n't slept well for weeks, and now she must make up for it. Nature'll take care of her better than we could."

"How glad I am you're here, Mrs. Weatherby! We're so lost without Clit when anything happens,

and Beth was so strange. We could not make her speak, try as we might."

The Gorgon's severe countenance glimmered with a smile. She liked to be needed, and the girlish speech pleased her.

"I shall stay tonight," she said. "You young things can't be left alone. Is this the one who is — married?" dropping her voice to a stage whisper.

Lala nodded, and came closer. "Yes," she whispered back, "and she may be a widow now! Her husband is fatally wounded with one of those dreadful Mexican knives."

Lala's attitude toward Beth was both peculiar and funny these days. From treating her with the half-contemptuous familiarity of near age and interests, she had swung to the opposite extreme, and now looked upon her with a distance and deference she would have accorded one far advanced in age and honors. In fact, so Beth now seemed to her. Such experiences as she had undergone, such a secret as she had carried, such trouble as was rending her heart, made her seem like one set apart, and Lala waited upon her with an assiduity she once would have scorned to show; and, though watching her furtively every moment, scarcely ventured a question or remark. A wide gulf, dug by strange and unimagined happenings, yawned between the simple girl-life of home and Beth's present situation, and Lala looked across it from her safer side with eyes of interest and wonder.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LETTER FROM CHILE.

WHEN the doctor came, he confirmed Mrs. Weatherby's opinion of the case, and made but a short call. Trix, hearing this reassurance, could more feelingly respond to the merriment of little Gladys at the prospect of having her own Miss Twits put her to bed. They were upstairs together when Mr. Gresham returned from down town, and he could hear his little one's gleeful ripple, mingled with the mellow, girlish laughter of Trix, as he stopped to remove his overcoat in the lower hall. Then he mounted to his upstairs study with a silent tread, not to disturb them, but left his door open so that he could hear nearly all that passed in the next room.

Trix was telling a story now, and he liked the voice, of a contralto pitch, with a touch of nervous life in it, to which he listened. By and by came a sleepy chirp from Gladys, "Now sing, p'ease," and Trix sang.

She had never made any pretensions to a voice, but her notes were mellow and true, and the song she chose well adapted to her register. There was

no effort, either, in the rendering of the tender lullaby, while every word came distinctly to the listener's ear. He had heard many of the world's celebrated songsters, yet he confessed to himself that few had given him greater pleasure than he experienced now.

As the song died softly on the still air, he rose, and noiselessly stepped to the open door beyond his own. The chamber was shadowed by the night screen, but a ray of light touched its central figures, throwing them out like a picture against its dark background; a simple picture, only a fair young girl with head bent tenderly above the little white-robed figure in her arms, but it was beautiful to Arthur Gresham. The wife of his early youth had been far more perfect, with the perfection of form and feature, but she had loved the wealth, fashion, and position of her married life better than husband or child. He had never seen her, in the one year of Gladys's life she had lived to know, ever bend above her baby with so true and sweet a look as graced the visage of this almost stranger.

He advanced quietly, and Trix looked up with a smile, to meet a glance which brought a delicate flush to her cheek. "I think she is asleep," she whispered.

"Yes, I will lay her down. She is too heavy for you to lift. I am very grateful!" and as he stooped to take the child from her warm, soft arms, he thought, "This is my ideal of a woman!" while she

felt, suddenly, how strong and safe a girl might feel when sheltered in the home of a man so true, so gentle, and so pure.

Beth woke from her long trance-like sleep weak in appearance, but really strengthened both in mind and body, — a strength she had need of to endure the suspense of the following days. Mrs. Weatherby, meanwhile, had developed from a Gorgon into a guardian angel, grim of aspect as some of our heavenly messengers do seem to our earthly vision at times, but with such perfection of care for the motherless brood she had gathered under her downless wings that they could but acknowledge her worth.

“Really,” said Lala, with pathos, “I shall grow to like her, if she is n’t careful. She’s like Pope’s, or somebody’s, picture of Vice.

“Our Gorgon monster’s of so fierce a mien
That to be hated needs but to be seen;
But seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace!”

O Trix! Can you imagine yourself *kissing* her?”

“You saucy girl!” laughed her sister, “when she has been so good. Pope ought to rise up and haunt you for such a parody on his lines!”

“Oh, I hope he won’t! If it’s to be anybody, let it be Keats. I dote on Keats, and think I could endure even his ghost! Ah, Nell,” as the latter entered, “how’s Beth this morning?”

“Better, she’s coming down-stairs. Trix, Mr

Gresham's in the library, and wants to speak with you a moment."

Trix sprang up from her seat by the dining-room fire, where the girls were wont to linger after breakfast, and hastened to her friend, for so already did she call this neighbor whose many kindnesses had broken down all formal barriers. He took her offered hand in a warm clasp, and said, "I've a great favor to ask, Miss Merritt."

"I am glad!" responded Trix, promptly. "You have had it all your own way as regards neighborly services, long enough."

"No, don't say that; I hope we have only made a beginning in that direction. But this is my request. It is necessary for me to go to the city in order to select some furniture for the drawing-room, which has not yet been fully arranged, and I would like to take Aunt Martha with me, as she has such excellent judgment, but Gladys ——"

"Has asked to stay with me? I do hope so."

"You have guessed it. And may she?"

"May she? The dear baby! It will give me — all of us — the greatest pleasure."

"Miss Beatrix, it is hard for a father to find words expressive enough to thank you."

"I want no thanks. I love Gladys; why should n't I ——"

As her eyes met his, she stopped suddenly in her impulsive speech, and the rich color swept her cheeks.

"Let her come," she added, more calmly, "and we will do our best to entertain her."

"She is always entertained here. Thank you, and good-bye."

He held out his hand again, and as he released hers and turned away, Trix thought, vaguely, "Am I fickle and changeable in my regard for people, or does something fine and true in this man put others I have known to shame?"

So Gladys came for a few days, and was happy as a bird in the young, free atmosphere of this unmethodical household, while Trix, following her about by day and holding her close in loving arms at night, felt that she had no more tears to shed over an episode whose sting of shame and regret was daily lost in new emotions, sweeter, stronger, fuller than life had ever offered her before.

Gladys had gone back home, Nell was out riding with Dick, Lala at school, and the three other girls sitting together, when the afternoon post brought Thorne's long-expected letter from Chile. It was, briefly, as follows :—

"I am here, and have found Lester. He is alive, but very ill; has not been fully conscious since the blow that felled him. The knife-thrust in his side did little harm besides weakening him through loss of blood, as it reached no vital part; but the blow on the head from some blunt instrument crushed in the skull, rendering the operation of trephining

necessary. Since it was performed, about a fortnight since, he has shown gleams of semi-consciousness momentarily.

“His intimate friend on shipboard, Lieut. Whalley, told me the story of the fight. He and Palmerlee were walking quietly along the street, when they heard shouting, imprecations, etc., at a little distance, and running to the spot, saw two of their common sailors being set upon by a party of Chileans. At once they plunged into the fray and, keeping the Chileans at bay with their revolvers, ordered the men to run for it, as they were unarmed. They did so, at which the enraged mob pressed our two officers closely.

“The street was narrow, and all about them unfriendly, but they would not fly. Standing back to back, each with a revolver in one hand and cutlass in the other, they slowly retreated shorewards, thus fighting, till, seeing them about to make their escape, the Chileans made a sudden rush, in which Palmerlee’s revolver was knocked from his hand, and thus disabled, in spite of Whalley’s efforts, he was quickly struck down by repeated blows. Satisfied with this, the leader of the roughs called off his men, and Whalley was able to get his comrade cared for in a dispensary near by, till he could be conveyed back to the ship.

(Later.) “I began this yesterday, but was interrupted. This morning, Palmerlee was conscious for several moments, and seemed to recognize Whalley,

who was bending over him. The latter knows the story of his marriage, and says he has suffered deeply through not hearing from you. He wrote everywhere it seemed possible to reach you, then sent letters to your grandfather, Calvin Jones, and the Indian woman at the hacienda, but without success. He never suspected why he did not hear, but supposed it was because his own letters went astray, and so you had no address to send to. He was very low-spirited over the long detention, especially when, instead of the recall home they all looked for after the close of the war, they were ordered to a longer stay. He felt certain, once in the States, he should quickly find you. Whalley says he never saw such devotion as his for you. I write this that you may receive some comfort to lighten the news of his serious injuries. When he is able, I am to bring him home, but that may be weeks yet, though today's changes encourage me. Keep up good heart, and believe that everything is being done for him that can be."

Before Beth had finished reading this aloud, Lala came in, and dropping noiselessly into a chair, listened with the rest. As Beth closed the brief record of love and bravery, she broke out, "I don't believe one of you appreciates Thorne as he deserves. Lester Palmerlee is not the only hero in this affair. Think of going clear off there to hunt up, nurse back, and bring home the husband of the girl he has always cared most for! I tell you it's wonderful!"

“Lala!” admonished Nell, in a low voice.

“Well, I’m through. I’ve said it; and I’m thinking a good deal more! I used to laugh at Thorne for something of a poke, but I take it all back. He’s as much of a knight as any of those fellows with hard names we study about in our Tennyson Analysis, and I’m proud of him, I am!” and, actually, her brilliant gypsy eyes were softened by real tears of tender feeling.

Beth smiled at the outburst, a smile that was akin to tears also, and felt a warmer feeling toward this young sister, whose impatient brusqueness and girlish unrestraint had often been a trial to her during the past hard months.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THORNE WRITES, AND CLARISSA SPEAKS.

A WEEK later came another letter from Thorne. Lester was conscious now, and slowly improving. They had been cautioned against exciting him in any way, however, and he had been made to understand that Thorne was his nurse. "Both Whalley and I feel," he wrote, "that direct news from you will be an aid to recovery, but the surgeon says wait. We cannot afford to run any risks with a man in so precarious a state. Even a breath may topple him over. He has the best of nursing, and the climate here is exceptionally fine, but I long to get him away before the hottest months, which correspond to our winter. Then, too, this harbor is not a safe anchorage, and wind storms, which greatly menace the shipping, are frequent. When on shore I have already felt two of the *temblores*, or slight earthquake tremblings, which are of so frequent a nature that the inhabitants scarcely notice them, and must say that I prefer life on a more solid basis than seems to exist in these parts!

"But the nights are something to remember, so

clear is the air, and so brilliant the heavens. It seems as if they bent almost within reaching distance, at times, and the planets glow like great electric lamps suspended in space. Our captain claims to have actually seen the crescent of Venus without a glass, but his eyes have almost telescopic power, anyway. I am extremely interested in all I see, and shall be glad when so beautiful a country settles down to peaceful living once more. I must go now, to change Lester's bandages. I am getting very fond of the dear fellow, as has always been a trick of mine with everything I have the care of. He looks much better today, though thin and pale to gauntness. Will write again soon. I believe, God willing, you will soon have your husband back, a well man!"

After this, Beth gained rapidly, in health, flesh, and color. The bracing fall atmosphere helped her physically as the hopeful tone of these letters did mentally, and the long walks she took to work off her restlessness were undoubtedly beneficial. All felt it, and were happy in the change. With the weight of a supposed mortal ailment lifted from their minds, Clit and Elinor grew also younger, and the latter was so happy in her betrothal that some of its bliss overflowed upon the rest. So the days of that November, though often filled with gloom outside, were snug and peaceful within.

This seemed to be Mr. Gresham's opinion, at least, and he fell into a habit of dropping in nearly

every day, ostensibly to bring Gladys over, or take her home, but as he was never in a hurry on these occasions, they often lengthened out into regular visits. He was a fine linguist, and discovering that Trix had been obliged to give up the study of Spanish because her teacher had moved out of town, he begged her to read with him, as he would be more than glad of this incentive to keep him from rusting. Their readings usually took place in the little tower-room, and were, no doubt, exceedingly interesting and instructive to both, and Trix felt that Lala's sly sarcasms upon the subject were quite uncalled for!

So the weeks slipped by, in that rapid way they have of doing before the midwinter holidays, and one morning came a letter, saying, "Lester knows now whose messenger I am; I have just told him, and have not words to depict his pleasure. He has been gaining rapidly since I last wrote, and now sits up a part of the day. So, this morning, as I sat beside him, came the desired opportunity. He watched me rolling bandages a moment, then said, 'Lewis, you don't strike me as the usual type of professional nurse. How did you happen to adopt the calling, and what brought you so far away from your native land?'

"I answered slowly, 'I came on purpose to nurse you.'

"He stared, then laughed. 'No! That's too steep. I've had every attention and care, but a

nurse out from the States — that's beyond even our captain's good nature!'

" 'It was n't by the captain's orders that I came,' was my reply, 'but by your wife's.'

"At that, a great wave of color went over his pale face, and he looked at me with piercing intensity. 'What do you know of my wife?' he asked, hoarsely.

" 'I have known her since she was an infant; we are cousins by adoption, if not by blood, and I have always called her mother Aunt. I consider Beth Merritt almost a sister.'

"At your name his eyes grew brilliant. 'Then it is my wife — my real wife? I was afraid —'

"He stopped short, and I sat still, looking at him gravely. 'What do you mean, Palmerlee? Is there another claiming that title?'

" 'Yes, there is one. It's a queer story, and I meant to tell it to Beth before I left, but had no time. But tell me about my darling. Is she well? Why have n't I heard from her, and how did she happen to send you?'

" 'I must hear your story first,' I replied. 'I have nothing to tell you of Elizabeth Merritt till I hear all you have to tell me about this — other one.'

"He laughed outright. 'She is *not* Elizabeth Merritt; she is Elizabeth Palmerlee, my own lawful, wedded wife, and no woman on God's earth can ever claim me from her! But this is the story. One of my distant cousins is a poor, crazed creature, who

was kept in our family, out of pity, for many years. She conceived a violent passion for me, though I always avoided her, as she was positively repulsive to me, and so tormented me, poor, foolish thing! that we had to send her to an asylum. After a time, she became violently insane, and one of her hallucinations is that she is Mrs. Lester Palmerlee. She will answer to no other name, and as I am now left almost her only guardian, I told the attendants to gratify her caprice; it could do me no harm. I fear it will greatly annoy Beth, though, when she hears, but at the time we were married, I supposed the poor girl had forgotten her mania, and might never resume it. But a hasty call at the asylum, on the day I sailed, showed me she had resumed her borrowed name. I then wrote of it to Beth, but I fear she never received my letters. Now, for mercy's sake, give me news of my wife!'

" 'She is waiting for you in her own home. She lost her mother, then her grandfather, soon after your departure, and since then has never heard from you till she saw the notice of your being wounded, in the paper. She loves you, and is waiting to welcome you home as soon as you can possibly travel. She, too, has a story to tell you, Lester, which I have no right to anticipate from her lips; but be assured that all is well now.'

"Then I insisted he must talk no more, and gave him his medicine, leaving the room till he should have finished his nap. But first I handed him the

photograph of yourself which I brought with me, and then he ceased to murmur at my imperative command. A little later I looked in upon him again. He was asleep, a smile on his lips, and his cheek pressed against your own."

Both broke into sobs as she read these words, and Clit looked up with a severe countenance. "How strangely things are ordered in this world! Here is one poor girl longing so deeply for Lester's love, and you, who have it all, could not appreciate the boon."

Beth would once have resented such a treading upon facts; now she resented nothing.

"I will try and make it up to him, if God will permit me!" she said, humbly. "And Clit, don't feel as if I did not love him. I did, or I could not have been so wretched; only there were so many other feelings, and in the maze of emotions I lost my way, and actually was like one demented for a time. What was it that made me dream of this awful hand-to-hand encounter, the very night after it happened, if there was not between us that subtle magnetic attraction which only love bestows?"

Clit shook her head, with something very like a sniff. "I don't understand you at all, Beth, with your mazes, complexities, and magnetism! To me, a girl either loves, or does not. If she does, she is proud of her lover and glad to bear his name; if she does n't, she will have none of him. It's well Lester

is a patient man, and cares so much for you. Some of them would n't stand it!"

Beth bit her lips, but her eyes were blind with tears. Perhaps she deserved the censure, but its lash was keen. And could even Clit, precise, self-poised, and with no strange deeps of feeling to astonish her own conscience with their unexpected upheavals, ever love any man as she now loved Lester?

Peace-making Nell broke the awkward silence. "It's well, perhaps, Clit, that we are not all alike, and that the girl who suits one man would not another, else things would be more complicated than they are. I'm sure I would n't want my Dick in love with the whole family!" laughing merrily. "Come, Beth, you said you were going to take the rest of that chicken to old Auntie Weeks, and some cough-mixture, too. Let's go this afternoon; I feel just like walking."

Beth gladly accepted this opening for retreat, and the two were soon off, leaving practical Clarissa to her meditations and her mending.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS DAY.

“**W**HERE’S Beth? Here’s a telegram for her!” cried Lala, toward noon of a morning in December, as she poked her head into the library, where Clit and Nell were busy.

“Gone down town with Trix for Christmas shopping,” said the former, as she rose; “let me have it. It must be from Thorne, and I ought to open it, I think.”

She did so, to read, — “‘Arrived here this morning. Start for home to-night. Will be with you for Christmas.’ It’s from Thorne at San Francisco! Isn’t that good? How delighted Beth will be!”

“Oh!” cried Lala, “How I wish we could keep it for a surprise; could n’t we, Clit? Do, *do* say yes!”

“Why, I don’t know; what do you think, Elinor? They ought to be here about next Thursday—the very day before Christmas, I declare! Shall we get ready slyly, and say nothing to her?”

Elinor’s sweet eyes shone. “It would be a delightful Christmas present! Why not?” and so it was decided.

Of course, Trix was let into the secret, also Dick

and the Greshams, barring wee Gladys, who could scarcely have borne the weight of so momentous a matter upon her little brain, as yet, and great were the preparations; and mysterious enough the bearing of all its sharers.

But mystery, mince-meat, and magnificence belong by right to Christmas week, and Beth, just then supremely happy over the acceptance, and liberal payment, of a little story she had sent away with few hopes of success, noticed nothing unusual. Nor did she realize just why this simple tale should have touched some hard editor's heart, when so many elaborate sketches had failed to make the slightest impression upon that adamant individual. She did not see that through all its simple lines breathed a spirit utterly unknown to her past writings, a spirit of "peace and good will" eminently befitting the holiday season about which she had written. The world was a new one to her since her own new birth. Its possibilities were greater, her own aspirations higher; she could look beneath the surface now, and this made her judgments charitable, and her sympathy sincere. Happy Beth! That all this "glory," reflected from above, had not come too late!

She did wonder a little at missing the accustomed weekly letter from Chile, but the mails were often irregular from there, so she would not worry; and she told herself, in homely phrase, but with delightful meaning, that no news was good news.

Many will remember that week before the Christ-

mas of 1891, a muggy, rainy time, more like the usual April weather of the middle states than that we expect in December. But here every one was so busy hurrying up belated fancy-work, or rushing about for last packages, that the weather was for once almost unnoticed. Thursday came and passed, but did not disturb the serenity of the waiting household, for watchful Lala had intercepted another telegram from Chicago, and it was certain that, after a night's rest there, the travellers would arrive in time for the late dinner Christmas day.

It cleared that night, and the 25th dawned sunny and warm, with the balminess of spring pervading the atmosphere, rather than the keen chill of winter. Nell came in, radiant, to breakfast with a half-dozen pansies she had culled from under the dead leaves in her own little bed, and all felt these "thought-blossoms," braving the frosts of December, quite put to shame the richer floral decorations furnished from the greenhouse.

"They are for you, Beth," she said, laying them beside her sister's plate. "This is *your* day, dear."

"My birthday — yes! I am twenty-one to-day; a full-fledged woman, at last. It ought to bring me something specially good, and I feel sure it will. I must hear from Thorne today, and possibly by this time Lester can answer with his own hand the letters I have written him!"

Her face was so lovely as she spoke that Nell felt constrained to bend and kiss her. "May it bring

you every blessing, love! I'm sure you deserve them."

"Oh no, Nell! I deserve nothing; but that makes the good things only the sweeter when they come. Thank you for the flowers! I shall wear them to church, and remember you while I pray."

It was with souls all uplifted and in perfect peace that our five sisters walked to the sanctuary that delightful morning. Beth, no longer "The Odd One," walked in the centre of the little group, now one, now another, pressing to her side, for sorrow and suffering, love and sympathy, had drawn them into a close circle in which was no break. Even Lala was subdued and still with happiness, this day.

Home again, Clit flew to the kitchen, where Charity was up to her eyes in business. The Greshams were to dine with the Merritt family, also Mrs. Godfrey, and Dick, of course. Finding everything in train, as it only could be under Charity's watchful eyes, she hastened to her room, for the modest church attire was now to be exchanged for a dinner costume befitting the occasion. In fact, all the girls were making a careful toilet, but for some reason Beth's seemed of the first importance to each. First, it was Nell with a bunch of Christmas roses for her belt, then Trix, to say, "Be sure and wear the new dress, dear, it is so becoming!" while Lala hovered self-forgetfully about, with pins and curling-tongs, to give the final touches.

But when entirely costumed Beth fully repaid

their efforts, for she had never looked more beautiful. It was not so much, either, because of her dress, nor the clear, youthful bloom which had been steadily returning of late, but rather because of an expression new, and inexpressibly fine and sweet, which told of a soul at peace with itself and with its Maker. This was a beauty youth could neither give nor take away.

All was in perfect train, and the time had narrowed down to minutes. Dick and Arthur Gresham were, indeed, gone to meet the travellers, and Charity was basting her turkey with groans of delight over its exquisite shade of brown, when an odd contretemps came near upsetting everything. Beth went into the dining-room for a glass of water, and, urged on doubtless by some mischievous pixie, abroad for Christmas junketing, began to count the covers. She had supposed there would be ten, — five Merritts, three Greshams, Mrs. Godfrey, and Dick ; but no, here were twelve ! Twice she counted, to be certain, then flew to Rusha. “ You ’ve made a mistake ; you ’ve set the table for twelve, instead of ten ! ”

Rusha grinned, then, with a greatness befitting an Americanized Scandinavian, rose to the occasion. She neither tried to explain, nor deny, she simply said, “ Why, have I ? I ’ll look to it at once, Mrs. Palmerlee ! ” and getting the young matron out of the room, leaned against the closed door and laughed till she cried. She always considered this

a sort of crisis in her life, during which she had been tried and not found wanting, and told the story until it grew into a drama by skilful additions!

Lala had a good deal to say about the weather, just then, and flitted in and out of doors like a nervous robin engaged in nest-building, until at last she popped her head into the library with a look of immense meaning, and the words, "I think some of our guests are arriving."

Clit rose, actually pale for the moment, Nell and Trix also, and all gazed at Beth. She, finding nothing specially exciting in the fact that Mrs. Godfrey's carriage might be rolling in, was a trifle puzzled, but rose with the rest. Clit disappeared in the hall, and a moment later there was a confused sound without. Beth turned perplexedly to Nell, but before she could ask a question, she saw, just without the doorway, a familiar figure.

"Thorne!" she cried, piercingly, "Thorne, *where* is my Lester?" then, as in a dream, she saw a thinner figure, like, yet unlike, the husband of her memories.

"My wife!" was his answering cry, and then, forgetting all the world beside, the two sprang together, and seemed to merge all individuality for that one fond minute in the long embrace of perfect love and mystic union.

And during that one breathless minute no one moved nor spoke. All eyes were dimmed, all throats choked with emotion. In the presence of deepest

feeling, humanity is dumb. But soon Beth turned to the rest. She would never be wholly self-absorbed again, and they should share her joy as they had shared her sorrow. "Nell, Clit, Trix, Lala, come and welcome my husband!"

Then, while the too poignant feelings escaped in happy congratulations and laughter, she turned to Thorne. "My brother!" she said, in a low tone which *would* tremble. "I cannot thank you; I can only give you the one place in my heart which has always been empty. I never had a brother; will you be Lester's and mine from this day on?" and bending over her hand, Thorne told himself there were many tender ties, many blessed opportunities in life, even for him. If Duty was a stern guide, who seldom sought the flowery paths, at least she gave one a sense of firm foothold, and clear directions, which permitted rapid advance and a free gait; and he turned to Lala, who just then addressed him, with a sunny smile upon his lips.

Then Beth turned back to her own. "You must n't tire him, girls, you know he is n't strong! Lester, you are thin, but not so pale as I feared," leading him gently to a chair; "and do you wear that Turkish fez to hide the scars?"

"Yes, love, I do; or, rather, the plasters. I hope it is becoming?" with his old, mischievous laugh.

"Everything becomes you, I think," was her answer, and then she blushed rosily at her own foolishness, as she caught Dick's amused glance.

"Here, my precious pair of idiots!" said that individual, in a low tone, "I know just how you feel, and I suggest a half-hour of retirement from the world!" and he threw open the door of the little tower-room, with a flourish.

"My friend, your penetration is absolutely wizard-like!" laughed Lester, quickly rising. "Come, Beth!" and the door closed behind them.

"Yes," Lala flung after them, "have it out by yourselves, by all means; *we're* going to visit with Thorne!"

In fact, they all gathered about him, and made more of a hero of him than the modest fellow quite enjoyed. Even Mrs. Godfrey and the Gorgon, just arrived, put by a polite little squabble they had begun in the hall over the weather on last Christmas day (the two were as antagonistic as a weazel and a hen) and listened, while Gladys pressed against his knee, her great pansy eyes raised in juvenile adoration.

The two in the tower-room, together once more after being so long sundered, stood for a minute looking into each other's eyes, speechless with happiness, then Beth, with a little sob, crept closer.

"Lester, you have a great deal to forgive in your wife. I tremble when I think of it!"

He put his arms about her, and looked down into the quivering face. "Dearest," he said, tenderly, "I think the first principle of love is forgive-

ness. I do not quite understand what it is you need pardoned, but I am sure my love is great enough to stand the test. However, we will put it by today — all shall be joy and peace at Christmas time!”

She threw up her head with one of the quick transitions of her girlhood. “O my dear, you have come home, and I have no present for you, unless — Lester, let me give you myself over again on this sacred day, the day of my Savior’s birth, and of my own! From this time on, I am yours ‘to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, till death us do part, and thereto I plight thee my troth.’”

“God help me to be worthy of the trust!” he answered, deeply moved. Then he bent and kissed her lips, still quivering with the solemn words, and thus was their true marriage consummated.

THE END.



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